University of Alberta

A Narrative Inquiry into Three Teachers' Experiences of Learning and Teaching English in China

by

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requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Dedication

This work is for my wife, 侯英, and my daughter, 崔竞元.

Abstract

In this narrative inquiry I studied my and other two English teachers' learning and teaching experiences in China. I revisited our experiences of schooling, teaching, and other threads in our lives to inquire into the following puzzles: our teacher identity, our relationship with curriculum, and our position in China's educational reform landscape (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985; Clandinin & Huber, 2005). We three teachers all came from "underdeveloped" small places in China. As shown in the study, we have many similar and consonant overlappings in our learning and teaching experiences. In this study I found when we taught according to our beliefs of what teaching is, our stories often ran against the major story lines of the educational landscape we were living in. As a result of this conflict between our "secret stories" and the "sacred story" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996), many of our "secret stories" took place under our "cover stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). As also shown in the study, we teachers felt we were being treated as "un-knowers" (Vinz, 1996) and non-curriculum makers in our teaching landscape. We felt we were being asked to play the role of knowledge transmitters, or part of the "conduits" of the "banking" education system (Freire, 2000). We also felt that our personal practical knowledge was not being valued as legitimate professional knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). As a result of this study I came to believe that for English teaching reforms to succeed in China, teachers' voices should be heard; that teachers should be involved in curriculum making; that teachers' personal practical knowledge should be legitimated as basis of their professional knowledge growth; and that teachers should have more room for living out their "secret stories" in and out-of classrooms (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996).

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CHAPTER ONE:

THE RESEARCH PUZZLE

China has been going though educational changes and reforms ever since the Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 and universities and colleges reopened their doors to students. However, as might be true of any other transformation in society, the process of China's educational reforms is not always smooth or easy to adapt to for students and teachers. Growing from a school age boy to a university teacher, I walked under, within and through those educational, social, ideological, economic, and philosophical changes in China. I experienced the changes in China as I passed crises, pressures, anxieties, excitements and hopes in my life.

I experienced great pressures and underwent changes preparing for the entrance exams for universities. After being accepted by a university, I struggled to get used to the new relationships in campus life. After I graduated with my first degree, I became an English teacher and new struggles followed. When I was teaching English in China, I felt I did not know enough teaching methods and theories to teach, and that I did not know how to conduct the educational research that I was expected to do. I also felt I lacked first-hand living experiences in an English speaking country and a PhD degree to better qualify myself as a teacher. I was told my personal experiences had nothing to do with my teaching and I sensed that I needed new, academic experiences to be a qualified teacher. Under these circumstances, I came to Canada and started my doctoral studies.

I came to Canada to find the answers to how to better teach English and how to do educational research work; I came to obtain life experiences in a native English-speaking country and to earn a title that will better qualify me as an English teacher in China; I also came to find who I was expected to be and how I could better fit into a role that was expected of me. I came with a conviction that my past experiences had little or nothing to contribute to make me an able teacher or researcher.

In this doctoral journey, as a person walking in the parade of changing landscapes (Geertz, 1995), I found myself again losing grasp of who I was and what I knew in a brand new context, while I was trying to find out who I had been and what I should have known in an old landscape. In my doctoral journey, I found that in classes and seminars a lot of sharing and discussions are about personal experiences. I found myself drawing on my personal experiences of learning and teaching to contribute to class discussions and to finish my course assignments. I also found that there were no ready answers to the best way to teach English. Gradually I turned my focus to inquiries rather than to find set answers.

In my doctoral studies, I also eagerly explored the ways of conducting educational research. I first joined an introductory research course, which mostly covered quantitative research. I enjoyed the course very much and had an initial understanding of the concepts, symbols, designs, and even calculations in quantitative research (Fraenkel, 2000). Then I came to the great discussions about the different epistemological and ontological beliefs that qualitative and quantitative researchers may consciously or unconsciously work

under (Ellis, personal communication, Edmonton, September, 2002; Clandinin, personal communication, Edmonton, 2002). Among the discussions and especially with my experiences at the Research Issues table in the Center for Research for Teacher Education and Development, I came to realize that what I was really concerned with was not so much about numbers, or about treating people as standardized trend markers, but about individuals with unique feelings, emotions, and experiences. As I continued to join the Research Issues table where researchers/students came each week to share the stories of their lives and stories of their research work in process, I then found, especially with my progress in the Narrative Inquiry course, that besides my inquiry of how to better teach English, I cared about who I was as a teacher and researcher. I began to see that in order to understand myself as a teacher I need to study my experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

Indeed, as I attend to my life experiences, I might come to a better understanding of my experiential knowledge, knowledge that researchers such as Connelly and Clandinin (1985, 1988) and Clandinin and Connelly (1995) referred to as "personal practical knowledge." They define personal practical knowledge as narrative, composed and expressed in teachers' practices and as shaped by and shaping their professional knowledge (Clandinin, personal communication, Edmonton, 2003). I feel in my past teaching, my personal practical knowledge had not been valued, and that it had not been linked to my professional knowledge. By reclaiming, studying, and learning from my

personal practical knowledge, which is embedded in and is composed through my experiences, I might have a chance to grow in my professional teaching life.

Thus, my experiences of schooling and teaching became sources for my identity search, sources of my practical knowledge, and the basis for me to form and understand my professional knowledge.

I came to Canada with the conviction that I was an un-knower (Vinz, 1996) and that my past experiences were irrelevant and worthless to my teaching and educational research. However, now I would like to reclaim my experiences, and by studying my experiences I would like to piece together the puzzle of how the places, times and relationships shaped who I was as a student and who I was/am/will be as a teacher. Furthermore, I would like to explore the relationship between who I was/am/will be as a teacher and who I was/am/will be asked to be by the educational landscape. In doing so, I inquire into my personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985), my teacher identity (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), and my curriculum making on the professional knowledge landscape of English teaching in a university in China (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). These set the puzzles for this research. The research puzzles around the relationships of teacher personal practical knowledge, curriculum making on the professional knowledge landscape and teacher identity are important ones for us to understand if we are to understand the dilemmas teachers experience as reforms in English language teaching are implemented in China (Clandinin & Huber, 2005).

As I try to piece together the puzzles, I study my past learning and teaching experiences and do similar narrative studies with two other English teachers in China. In this research I piece together puzzles in their learning and teaching lives that are similar to those in my own life.

CHAPTER TWO:

RELATED LITERATURE

I. Contexts of English Teaching in China

In order to understand me and my other two participants as English learners and teachers, our relationship with the English teaching curriculums, and how we see ourselves in the English teaching reform landscape, It is important to understand the contexts of English teaching in China.

A. Traditional context of English teaching in China

English has been an important subject in China's educational system and a major college entrance exam subject for both arts and sciences students since the end of China's Cultural Revolution. There are many reasons for people in China to study English:

> On a personal level, proficiency in English is key to a host of opportunities: to enter and graduate from university; to go abroad for further education; to secure desirable jobs in public and private sectors, foreign-invested companies, or joint ventures; and to be eligible for promotion to higher professional ranks (Ng & Tang, 1997; as cited in Hu, 2002, p. 30).

Grammar translation and audio-lingual methods have been the mainstay of English teaching in China, as Tang and Martino (2000) summarized:

> All, or most, language teaching in China has been direct instruction (DI), dominated by a combination of grammar-translation method and audio-lingual approach, which emphasize the direct teaching and learning of the basic elements of English, namely, phonetics, grammar, vocabulary and sentence patterns. The direct instruction classroom tends to be teacher-centered, rule-centered, and textbook-centered. (p. 35)

All through my English learning and training processes, almost all of my Chinese-born English teachers used direct, teacher-centered, and textbook-centered teaching methods. Each typical English textbook that I studied in my high school and university English classes in China consisted of units or lessons. Each unit or lesson began with one or two English texts, followed by a vocabulary list, grammar explanations, and exercises on grammars and new words.

One typical kind of exercise was the "translation" part, either translation from English to Chinese or from Chinese to English. Translation exercises not only appeared in each textbook but also in exams. There were almost always fixed answers for the translation exercises. In my junior high school years, I feared that task, especially translating from Chinese to English, as I could not write complete English sentences then. In the university years, I hated that task because we had to memorize the fixed answers to get good grades in the exams. Our own translation, if missing key words in the fixed answers, could not guarantee good grades, even if the translations made perfect sense.

After the English textbook reform in high schools in 1994, grammar explanations disappeared in students' textbooks. Instead there appeared "check points" at the end of each unit that listed the names of the grammar rules that the students should know, but the textbooks did not offer details about the rules. The teachers needed to fill in the gap, or the students needed to find other sources for help, since grammar was and still is a major part of various English exams that the students have to take. The mere change of the look of textbooks did not change a learning/teaching environment.

One reason for the widespread use of grammar translation and audio-lingual methods in China's English curriculum and teaching practice is perhaps that "a language teaching methodology using repetition and drill is similar to the approach used to teach Chinese" (Strong, 1992, p. 3). Memorization has been a major part of China's "culture of learning" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996). Memorization seems to be the only way to learn to read and especially to write Chinese characters, there being very little correlation between the sounds of the Chinese words and the way they are written. I used to copy dozens of Chinese characters ten times each day as homework in my elementary school years; about 2,000 Chinese characters have to be learned in this painstaking way for one to become literate in Chinese. My daughter is in grade three in an elementary school in China now, and she has been doing the same copying homework almost each school day.

Memorization was a tradition in China's education. In the older times, students had to learn by heart such masterpieces as the works of Confucius and Mencius in order to pass the different stages of exams to earn a title and a position, or to become a scholar or a writer. An old Chinese saying still speaks loudly even today: "After learning 500 classical poems by heart, you will learn to write some yourself, even if you are not an expert on it" [熟读唐诗三百首，不会做诗也会吟]." This emphasis on memorization, sometimes even without understanding the meaning of the works being memorized, has been revived in at least some parts of China, as well as the trend to reevaluate China's cultural heritage, which was destroyed in the Cultural Revolution (Wu, 1993). In early 2004 my nephew, in Grade One in my parents' local town, had to memorize a thick book

of ancient Chinese poems that are hard to understand even by literate adult Chinese. This homework was assigned by his teacher, who insisted that memorizing these poems would help the students do well in the future college entrance exams, which were *only* eleven years away from a seven-year-old child. Some parents in other parts of China even pay tuition to send their children to part-time private schools to memorize ancient Chinese philosophical works. "It does not matter whether they understand the works or not now. They will understand them later with more life experiences" (He, 2003, ¶ 8). As I was doing this research work in 2004, this trend seemed to be spreading to our part of China too, as my daughter, who was also seven years old then, received similar recommendations from her elementary school teachers to join ancient Chinese masterpieces recitation classes.

Today students in China continue to rely on memorization to pass exams, and it seems in most cases that memorization is the only method that works, despite the goal of creativity in the curriculum. Many exams do not encourage creativity. In geography, history, and especially politics exams in schools, there are standard short-form bulleted answers to questions. The students, helped by the teachers, try first to locate the answers in their textbooks to different potential questions, then to memorize them. Even to prepare for exams in subjects such as physics and math, students must do many repetitive exercises to help them memorize formulas and standard steps of solving problems.

Memorization played a major role in the early stages of my studying English. I memorized almost all the English texts in my junior high and senior high English textbooks when I was preparing for my university entrance exams. Those memorized English texts were almost all the English world I was exposed to before I entered university. I memorized the words and the grammar rules "in order to understand and manipulate the morphology and syntax of the foreign language" (Stern, 1983, P.455), which, to me then, was almost all English was made up of. The memorization can be a good example of "learning" as opposed to "acquisition" (Krashen, 1981); however, it helped me to remember the English grammars, English words and their basic usages required to know for junior and senior high school students, and it helped me to earn good grades in the English entrance exam for universities.

When I first learned English in elementary school, I was very happy about the English alphabet song, as it was the tool that I could draw on to remember the twenty-six English letters. When we went to junior high school, the only thing I could immediately reproduce about the English that I learned in elementary school was the alphabet song. This probably explains why so many Chinese parents and English teachers in China encourage students to memorize English texts. The texts that are learned by heart and that can be fluently recited orally can also serve as what the English alphabet did for me: they neatly represent and include what the students need to learn according to the English course and exam syllabuses.

Brown (2000) thinks that those memorization efforts are only good for short-term memories, and that if it works in the long run, it is because the students made some meaning out of the texts:

> Rote learning can be effective on a short-term basis, but for long-term retention it fails because of the tremendous buildup of interference. In those cases in which efficient long-term retention *is* attained in rote learning situations like those often found in the audio-lingual method, perhaps through sheer dogged determination the learner somehow subsumes the material meaningfully *in spite* of the method! (p. 88)

I do not know how many longer-term benefits those short-term memorized texts give me, but though I "dog determinedly" rote learned the English texts, I always understood what I was reciting. However, I did not have chances to use those words in communication, and did not have chances to enrich my understanding of the words in different contexts. To get a similar result, I could have learned those words by memorizing sample sentences in a dictionary (though with fewer contexts between sentences, it would be harder). However, "the sense of a word ... is the sum of all the psychological events aroused in our consciousness by the word" and "the dictionary meaning of a word is no more than a stone in the edifice of sense, no more than a potentiality that finds diversified realization in speech" (Vygotsky, 1962, p.146).

Looking back, I cannot be sure whether the words in the texts had a powerful emotional impact on me then, as explained by Yeoman (1996):

> If words are understood only in an arid, decontextualized way .... they cannot have great cultural or spiritual power. The sign might mean something, in the

> semantic sense of being definable or translatable, but it does not signify in a powerful emotional way. (p. 601)

Later as an English major in university, I trained my English listening and speaking skills partly by listening to and speaking the same texts repeatedly, so this rote learning not only was a major method for my memorizing English words, set phrases and grammar rules, but also my basic tool of enhancing my English oral and aural abilities. At the university level, however, I had more opportunities to expose and use the words and phrases I memorized so that I could have better understanding of their "edifice of sense."

Brown (2000) said that each "new" language teaching method carries with it something from the grandparent method. He hinted that it probably was a bad idea to totally disregard a teaching method when new methods are popular. Brown wrote:

> Teachers and researchers have all too often dismissed certain theories of learning as irrelevant or useless because of the misperception that language learning consists of only one type of learning. . . . Methods of teaching, in recognizing different levels of learning, need to be consonant with whichever aspect of language is being taught at a particular time while also recognizing the interrelatedness of all levels of language learning. (p. 94)

Although "dog determined" memorization is not a preferable method when we have more choices today, "memorization" does not have to mean something bad. "No learning will happen without memorization" (J. Wu, personal communication, Internet, March 7, 2005).

Similarly, the grammar translation method seems still to serve a useful purpose in language learning and teaching in China, especially for certain age groups. Ausubel's

(1964; as cited in Brown, 2000) argues that "Adults learning a foreign language could, with their full cognitive capacities, benefit from deductive presentations of grammar. The native language of the learner is not just an interfering factor—it can facilitate learning a second language" (p. 51). However, it seems not preferable to use memorization of texts and grammar rules as the *only* way to teach/learn English.

B. Present and reform context of English teaching in China

In China, the traditional way of teaching, where teachers' talk takes up almost all the class time and where students sit and listen passively, has been referred to in China as the "stuffing duck" method. Freire (2000) called this the *banking model* of education. China has been trying to reform this practice in order to encourage more interactions between teachers and students, to give students more room for creative thinking, and simply to make education more meaningful and even fun. English classes have been a frontier for the educational reforms. The primary goal of teaching English, unlike other subjects such as science and math, is to develop communication skills (the Department of Higher Education of China, 2004, ¶ 2). It is, therefore, the area where it is hoped real communications will be involved in the classroom.

In recent years student-centered teaching—of which communicative language teaching (CLT) is the main example—has been introduced, discussed, tried out, and encouraged in English curriculum design, English classroom practice, and English teacher training programs in China. The different rationales between structure-focused

grammar translation/audio-lingual methods and CLT are a change from viewing English learning as a process of accumulating separated words, grammar rules and structures, to seeing it as a social relationship, negotiated between people in real-life-like situations and contexts (Brown 2000). Vygotsky's (1978) concept of "zone of proximal development," the gap between what a learner can achieve individually and what he/she can accomplish when assisted by a teacher or a more-experienced peer (p.86), helps shape and confirm this changed view on language learning. However, currently in China, teachers have many different understandings of teacher-centered classrooms and communicative language teaching (CLT). For some teachers CLT means "using procedures where learners work in pairs or groups employing available language resources in problem-solving tasks" (Richards & Rodgers, 2000, p. 88). For some it means to engage in spontaneous and meaningful discussions and interactions between the teacher and the students and between the students themselves. For many teachers in China, CLT remains a vague term that comes with other vague terms and ideas which are introduced to them from their superiors without detailed explanations.

English teachers seem to be under great pressure to teach English in this "new trend" right now. However, there are occasions when changes are made only superficially to obtain prestige, promotions, funding, and other benefits, when "school development plans were written to impress outsiders and had little impact on what actually happened in schools and classrooms" (Down, Hogan, & Chadbourne, 1999 p. 19). This superficiality, to give the impression of effecting changes, can discourage teachers from

trying to understand what student-centered classrooms and CLT really mean and can cause misunderstanding to them and even give these practices a bad reputation. Learning to live a new story of teaching involves a lot more hard work (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999; Clandinin & Huber, 2005).

According to Finocchiaro and Brufit (1983), CLT centers on communication in the target language (and some native language). As long as communication is achieved, perfection in grammar, structure or pronunciation is not too much of a concern (at least at the early stages). Though a well-agreed-upon definition of CLT is hard to achieve, the "notion of direct rather than delayed practice of communicative acts is central to most CLT interpretations" (Richards & Rodgers, 2000, p.68). In many ways CLT frees students and teachers from the rigid frames of the audio-lingual method, and if properly applied, can make language learning more meaningful and the classroom more fun, as CLT encourages the use of the target language from the beginning learning stage and does not encourage over-learning or rigid memorization of model dialogs or texts.

However, most English tests in China examine not how well the students can communicate and survive in the target language in its imperfect stages, but rather the "accuracy" of students' use of English and the "conscious" knowledge of grammars and vocabulary specified for different stages of target language learning. Those tests are standard, across the nation, province or city, and they significantly determine the students' future. This gap between the requirements in exams and the desire in teaching reform towards interaction and communication makes it difficult for the students and

teachers to choose what to do in their classrooms. The best they can do is to make an unclear compromise. Hopefully without much explanation and memorization, but through communication and interaction, the students "somehow" learn to use the language "accurately" and get to know "all" the grammar rules and required vocabulary. Or hopefully, while concentrating on grammar and vocabulary details, there is still some room left for discussions, sharing, or other meaningful communications. Most students now go to two different kinds of English classes in their in-school and out-of-school time: one for communication skills and one for grammars rules. They may have a "traditional" teacher who teaches test-required grammars and texts in "traditional" ways, and then another teacher who gives English lessons in general topics or self-chosen textbooks in more interactive and less formal ways consistent with CLT. Some teachers also have to adjust themselves according to the requirements of the particular classrooms they step into, even if the requirements are not their likings and not their strengths. A lot of English teachers teach in private classes outside their regular teaching schedule, both to make extra money and to cater to the need from students and parents.

Many existing CLT syllabus in China resemble "structural-situational and audiolingual principles" (Richards & Rodgers, 2000, p.82). There is a danger that teachers draw CLT right back to structuralism, especially when they are asked to follow and do everything according to the prescribed teaching plans, in which teachers and students usually have no say. One characteristic of communication in CLT is that the topics and directions and the length of activities vary according to specific situations, not

according to prescribed lists or fixed rules. Students' experiences, interests and meaningful involvement, which are central to CLT classrooms, can not be expected to follow pre-listed items and stages in a traditional syllabus. What is important is an environment that supports teachers and students to share ideas. However, one story can illustrate the gap between expectations and practice.

Dr. Joe Wu from the University of Alberta, was one of the trainers for teachers in Hebei province in China to use the new series of English textbooks, which, designed partly by the trainers, was an effort from the Chinese educational authorities to reform their English classes into interactive and communicative experiences for the teachers and students. The trainers tried to make their training a demonstration of meaningful and communicative activities for the English teachers who were being trained to use the new textbooks. The teachers in training enjoyed the processes and were quite eagerly involved in the discussions and interactive activities. However, one Chinese authority leader of the teachers in training went to the front of the class during a break and strongly scolded the teachers for their "lack of discipline and respect" in the classes. (J. Wu, personal communication, Edmonton, October, 2003)

This story helps show the gap between what the authorities want in documents and what they want in real life. It also shows the gap between how the authorities treat their inferior teaching staff and how the same authorities ask the teachers to treat their students.

It is not a big surprise that many researchers described CLT as hard to implement in China (e.g., Rao, 2002; Strong, 1992; Sun & Cheng, 2000; Tang and Martino, 2000; Zhang, 1997). China's social cultural context might be one reason for the difficulties in implementing CLT:

> CLT methodology, as it emphasizes on authentic language input, real-life like language practice and creative generation of language output, highly depends on its context. . . . The dependence of CLT on its context seems to be a way to understand this failure. (Sun & Cheng, 2000, p. 4)

China's results-oriented classrooms, influenced and controlled by the college entrance exams and various other entrance exams (e.g., the high school entrance exams and the postgraduate entrance exams), have been under pressure to change for years and have been hazardous to the physical and psychological health of students, teachers, and parents. Various reforms have been carried out to change the entrance exams, and a higher percentage of students now have access to universities than ever before. However, the competition is very tough, and the classrooms continue to be results oriented. This is the context of English teaching and learning in China. The context means that students learn English to pass various levels of English exams. Those exams test the students' English grammar knowledge, their reading, writing, listening skills, and occasionally a little bit of their conversational skills in fixed topics. Those exams are notorious for making it hard for students to choose the correct answers within misleading false ones. Occasionally we hear stories of how native English speakers failed Chinese-scholar-designed English tests.

In this context, teachers, students, and parents need to be very cautious to follow the callings of some reforms. Those teachers who are naïve enough to follow the reform calls in practice frequently have to eat the humble pie when their students could not do well in the standard tests, which basically jeopardize the students' future. Lessons learned from those sad stories have forced students, parents, and teachers to continue in the old ways to help students achieve the best possible results or grades, and to either keep a deaf ear to the official calling for reforms, or to put on some shows or just some paper works to please the officials.

English teachers may have other reasons not to be too enthusiastic about teaching English in a communicative way. Boyle's (2000) explanations for this reluctance for teachers to apply CLT in their classrooms are also relevant in Mainland China, even though the research was conducted in Hong Kong. Boyle stated that the "communicative movement in English language teaching" was not popular with Hong Kong teachers because "they felt it was noisy and disturbed adjacent classes, or that it involved too much class preparation time, or that their own English was inadequate to this less structured kind of teaching" (p. 149). In mainland China we can add to this the moral dilemma that teachers face. "For some teachers, teaching the right thing in the right way (in terms of grammar, etc.) is a moral responsibility rather than a simple issue of teaching methodology" (Sun & Cheng, 2000, p. 9).

Lack of experience and training in teaching student-centered classes also discourages teachers from trying new methods. Most teachers were not taught with

student-centered methods, and their understanding of student-centered and CLT classes comes from intuition, guessing, or limited observation and reading. What is also missing is the link between teachers' personal practical knowledge and the knowledge prescribed by the professional knowledge landscape (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Clandinin & Huber, 2005), which will be discussed in more detail in the later part.

Many scholars have argued that for CLT to succeed in China, "there must be a compromise between CLT methodology and the EFL context" (Sun & Cheng, 2000, p. 1).

> The implementation of a communicative curriculum within a Chinese university must take into account the current level of English instruction in China, the characteristics of the curriculum and its reception in China, and finally, the inservice training needs of the personnel involved in the implementation. (Strong, 1992, p. 2)

Rao (2002) also agreed: "To update English teaching methods, EFL countries like China need to modernize, not westernize, English teaching; that is, to combine the 'new' with the 'old' to align the communicative approach with traditional teaching structures" (p. 85). Brown (2000) warned that a teacher must not force students to act:

> A teacher needs to beware of trying to "create" in a student more so-called extroversion than is really necessary. We need to be sensitive to cultural norms, to a student's willingness to speak out in class, and to optimal points between extreme extroversion and introversion that may vary from student to student. (p. 156)

The change required is not as easy as a change in teaching methods, but calls for a change in teacher and student relationships and in the strict hierarchical power

relationship in society. Teachers, under pressure from the existing testing system and from wanting to retain their jobs by helping students to pass the exams, are powerless to change teacher-student relationships in the classroom. Cummins (1997) hoped that teachers will change social relationships through changing classroom relationships, which is still hard to effect in China's current situation. As I reflect on this reform moment in China, I see English-as-a-foreign-language teachers being asked, on the one hand, to develop different stories of who they are and what they know—that is, to take on different identities—and, on the other hand, to live within a context of examinations that has not changed.

> Teachers are only told to teach this or that, this way or that way. Their work is evaluated according to how many of their students can pass external examinations. In short, teachers are conditioned, if not forced, to be passive and reactive rather than proactive. (Zhang, 1997, p. 28)

Teachers need more say in deciding policies in their teaching; they need more experiences of sitting in differently taught classes for role modeling and for real life teaching experience resources; they also need more room to live in their own experiences of different ways of teaching, especially the room for experiment, and the room for rethinking and relearning from their own more successful or less satisfying teaching experiences. These concerns are related to teachers' role and teachers' voices (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), topics I will return to later.

C. The power of English context

English, as *the* second or foreign language of the global age, carries with it much more information than the linguistic system itself does (Pennycook, 1995). When we learn a new language, we learn a new culture, a new value system, and new attitudes. A new language also helps a learner to have more access to a new world, and this can bring psychological and physical changes in the person's life. Currently in China, whether a person can speak English (and how well one can speak it) helps to determine the person's socioeconomic position. With proof of good English, one can have a better chance to obtain better paid and higher position jobs, a better chance of further education either within China or in abroad, which in turn promises better future jobs. Even without considering the material benefits speaking good English can bring, the mere speaking of English is an honorable act, which in the same way as good clothing, shows respectful social position.

As researchers such as Pennycook (1994, 1995, 1998) and Tollefson (1995) caution us, while we appreciate English as the communicating tool for our world, we should be watchful for the special power it is carrying. English, like any other material items, when used as a means of measuring people, can become more desirable to the unwatchful eyes than *people* themselves.

When certain language carries power, it is very easy to reinforce a coercive power relationship (Cummins, 1997) in favor of the better language speaker, or the teacher, in

the classroom. Brown (2000) believed that students' imperfect target-language "system should not necessarily be treated as an imperfect system. . . . It should rather be looked upon as a variable, dynamic, approximate system, reasonable to a great degree in the mind of the learners, albeit idiosyncratic" (pp. 238-239).

In my second year of doctoral study in Canada, when I was helping with the 2003 Canadian Indigenous Language and Literacy Development Institute (CILLDI) summer programs, Jean Reston interviewed me about my literacy experiences and asked me which Chinese books, journals, or magazines I read regularly (J. Reston, personal communication, Edmonton, August 20, 2003). I was struck by the question, because as an English major and then an English teacher I had always been asked which *English* literature I had been reading. I had always invested my time in reading *English* materials since I majored in it in 1989. I felt that reading in Chinese "wasted" my time, which I felt I should devote to English. Jean's question triggered my rethinking about my native language and native culture development.

During my working as a research assistant for Dr. Heather Blair in the University of Alberta over a period of more than two years in the field of school children's literacy development, she frequently invited me to share Chinese children's, or my own, native Chinese literacy development experiences. I remember on one particular occasion she asked me whether there were researches of miscue analysis (Goodman, 1969, 1973) on Chinese literacy (H. Blair, personal communication, Edmonton, April 2, 2002). It is only after the challenges like these that I began to gradually regain my respect for my native

Chinese language and to realize that my native language is as valid a language for research as the language I am learning.

Thinking back, I recall my subconscious feeling of superiority in being able to speak and understand English towards my fellow Chinese who cannot speak English or cannot use it as well as I do. I also recall my subconscious belief that ideas originally expressed in English are deeper than those in Chinese.

II. Teacher Knowledge, Teaching Context and Teacher Identity

To understand my and my two participants' personal practical knowledge, our identity, and our relationship with the reforming educational system, I need to understand what "teacher knowledge," "teacher identity" and curriculum mean in general and in China's educational contexts.

A. Teacher knowledge

In my teaching in China, I felt I was a "not knower" (Vinz, 1996). I felt we teachers were expected to be knowledge transmitters, as "mere conduits of theoretical and cultural knowledge embodied in various curricula, teaching approaches and policies" (Clandinin, 1986, p. 3). The knowledge was wrapped up in textbooks and teachers' reference books, and I was supposed to transmit the knowledge, as intact as possible, to the students, carefully following each step given in the prescribed teachers' plans, in the compiling of which I was usually not consulted. Under this framework, my personal experiences were not valuable to my teaching. They were even potentially harmful, as

they may interfere with my "objective" transmitting of the original knowledge, and thus adding my flavors to it, which was not encouraged, if not overtly forbidden.

Connelly and Clandinin (1988, 1999), however, have different views on teacher knowledge. They see teachers not as transmitters, but as knowledge possessors, or knowers. "Following the work of Dewey (1963), Schwab (1970), Polanyi (1958), Gauthier (1987), and others, we became fascinated with trying to understand teachers as knowers: knowers of themselves, of their situations, of children, of subject matter, of teaching, of learning" (1999, p.1). They use teachers' "personal practical knowledge" as a way to understand teacher knowledge. They see teacher knowledge as:

> A term designed to capture the idea of experience in a way that allows us to talk about teachers as knowledgeable and knowing persons. Personal practical knowledge is in the person's past experience, in the person's present mind and body, and in the future plans and actions. Personal practical knowledge is found in the person's practice. It is, for any one person, a particular way of reconstructing the past the intentions of the future to deal with the exigencies of a present situation. (1988, p.25)

The very word "personal" may carry certain shocking weight to some educational "traditions" that I am inheriting, just as Connelly and Clandinin (1988) might have expected. "But what does it mean to be personal? One might think that all we were offering was an excuse for a teacher to visit his or her idiosyncrasies on students" (p.13). For Polanyi (1958), "the arts of doing and knowing, the valuation and the understanding of meanings, are ... different aspects of the act of extending our person into the subsidiary awareness of particulars which compose a whole" (p.65). For him, personal

participation is a fundamental part of knowing, as personal knowledge "commits us, passionately and far beyond our comprehension, to a vision of reality" (p.64). In line with Polanyi's (1958) ideas, Connelly and Clandinin (1988) believe "knowledge means something that not only has the temporal dimensions ... but also has these moral, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions as well" (p.22). For them, the temporal dimension of "past, present, and future," and those "moral, emotional and aesthetic" dimensions, or "values," are how knowledge is seen as "personal."

To further understand the context of teachers' "professional knowledge," and to connect "teachers' practical knowledge" with their professional knowledge, Clandinin and Connelly (1995) used the metaphor "landscape." They wrote:

> A landscape metaphor is particularly well suited to our purpose. It allows us to talk about space, place, and time. Furthermore, it has a sense of expansiveness and the possibility of being filled with diverse people, things, and events in different relationships. Understanding professional knowledge as comprising a landscape calls for a notion of professional knowledge as composed of a wide variety of components and influenced by a wide variety of people, places, and things. Because we see the professional knowledge landscape as composed of relationships among people, places, and things, we see it as both an intellectual and a moral landscape. (pp. 4-5)

With this metaphor of "landscape," we can understand teachers' knowledge by studying their past experiences, where "space, place and time" meet, the "three-dimensional space" in which narrative inquirers live and explore (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). Indeed, Connelly and Clandinin (1999) see "landscape" as "narratively constructed" and as "storied": "to enter a professional knowledge landscape

is to enter a place of story" (p.2). Besides the three dimensions of "space, place and time," they also see stories as "having a history with moral, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions" (p.2). They (1988) wrote:

> The point we are making is that our experiences, and therefore our personal practical knowledge that makes up our narratives, are never devoid of these affective matters. To know something is to feel something. To know something is to value something. To know something is to respond aesthetically. (p.26)

They characterize the professional knowledge landscape as being both moral and intellectual. To understand the "place" dimension of teachers' professional knowledge landscape, Clandinin and Connelly (1996) used the "in-classroom" and "out-of-classroom" metaphors. They see an "out-of-classroom" place as filled with "sacred stories." They see an "out-of-classroom" place as:

> A place filled with other people's visions of what is right for children. Researchers, policy makers, senior administrators and others, using various implementation strategies, push research findings, policy statements, plans, improvement schemes and so on down what we call the conduit into this out-of-classroom place on the professional knowledge landscape. We characterize this theory-driven view of practice shared by practitioners, policymakers and theoreticians as having the quality of a sacred story. (p.25)

Clandinin and Connelly (1996) see the "in-classroom" place as filled with "secret stories." They see "in-classroom" place as: "for the most part, a safe place, generally free from scrutiny, where teachers are free to live stories of practice. These lived stories are essentially secret ones" (p.25).

Clandinin and Connelly used the metaphors of "sacred stories," "secret stories," and "cover stories" to describe teachers' professional knowledge landscapes (Soltis,

1995). They also used "teacher stories," "stories of teachers," "school stories" and "stories of schools" to describe the landscape (Clandinin & Huber, 2005, p.48).

B. Teachers and curriculum makers

Connelly and Clandinin (1988) see curriculum as "something experienced in situations." They define "situation" as "made up of people and their surrounding environment" (p.6). They see curriculum as experienced by teachers, in dynamic relationship with students, living out previously composed stories, directing towards future stories (pp. 6-9). Thus Connelly and Clandinin believe understanding teachers' practical knowledge is the key to understand the curriculum they are making. "For each of us [teachers], the more we understand ourselves and can articulate reasons why we are what we are, do what we do, and are headed where we have chosen, the more meaningful our curriculum will be" (p.11). Indeed, Connelly and Clandinin (1992) see teachers not only as curriculum makers but "as a part of it" (p.365). Carter (1993) agrees: "for an individual teacher, theory and practice are integrated through her or his narrative unity of experience" (1993, p. 8).

Clandinin (2005) further explains a narrative approach to curriculum:

> Curriculum can be understood as the interaction of four curriculum commonplaces – learner, teacher, subject matter, and milieu (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988)....To understand teachers, we need to understand each teacher's personal practical knowledge, his/her embodied, narrative, moral, emotional, and relational knowledge as it is expressed in practice. We need to attend to the different kinds of stories – secret, sacred, and cover stories....We also need to attend to the nested milieus, in-classroom places, out-of-classroom places, storied

> places filled with stories of teachers, teacher stories, stories of school, school stories, stories of families, and families' stories. (pp. 29-30)

By the concept of teachers' personal practical knowledge, I see teachers as knowers, and as curriculum makers. By studying my experiences, my "secret, cover and sacred" stories, I can better understand my personal practical knowledge, better understand myself as part of the curriculum I am making. My personal practical knowledge, my "stories to live by" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), is also shaping my identity, or who I am as a teacher.

C. Teacher identity

In my teaching years, when the "sacred stories" made me feel my teacher experiences were illegal and irrelevant to my professional knowledge, they also endangered my teacher identity. As Connelly and Clandinin (1999) clearly described:

> We believe that the dilemmas experienced by the participants [teachers] ... and the intensity with which they are experienced, is partly connected with the identities each teacher lives out in her work and, partially, these matters are connected to the discrepancies each experiences between her identity and the formal curricular expectations of her role. (p.85)

After closely studying and discussing the ideas from Heidegger, Dilthey, Schapp, MacIntyre and Sartre, Carr (1986) drew the conclusion that personal identity is connected with one's "narrative coherence," and that in order to find ourselves, to "make sense" of one's life, one needs to look back (and *is* frequently doing that, consciously or

unconsciously) at one's past experiences to make a "narrative whole" by finding the "narrative coherence." Carr explains:

> Narrative coherence is what we find or effect in much of our experience and action, and to the extent that we do not, we aim for it, try to produce it, and try to restore it when it goes missing for whatever reason. (p.90)

Carr (1986) believes that the responsibility of composing one's identity is on each person her/himself, and that this is a demanding task: "The narrative coherence of a life-story is a struggle nonetheless, and a responsibility which no one else can finally lift entirely from the shoulders of the one who lives that life" (Carr, 1986, p. 96).

Connelly and Clandinin (1999) described teachers' identity as "stories to live by" that "are shaped by such matters as secret teacher stories, sacred stories of schooling, and teachers' cover stories" (p. 4). "Stories to live by," for them, is a way of narratively conceptualizing identity. Narrative understandings of knowledge and context are linked by a narrative understanding of identity as stories to live by.

In narrative understanding, teachers' "stories to live by" are their personal practical knowledge (shaped by their professional knowledge landscapes) and their teacher identity. Teachers' "stories to live by" are in their experiences and in their practice. (Clandinin, 1986, 2005; Clandinin & Connelly, 1988, 1995, 2000; Clandinin & Huber, 2005; Connelly & Clandinin, 1985, 1988, 1999).

Looking back at my stories to live by, now I realize that often I was living a cover story (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) so that I could fit into the dominant story of school in

China. The dominant story told me what I should be as a teacher. By living a cover story I gave the impression that I was what I was asked to be by the dominant story. This is probably what Liebkind (1989) called "identity negotiation": "We generally try to achieve a consensus with others about who and what we are" (p. 52).

III. Tensions and Dilemmas Teachers Experience on the Shifting Landscape

As I said above as a teacher I felt I was treated as a knowledge transmitter, as part of the conduit that ships knowledge from textbooks to students (Clandinin, 1986). The educational reform toward CLT seems to treat me differently, that is, with some new trust. I felt I was then expected to be a knowledge accumulator (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988). I was expected to learn the new teaching methods, to learn to transmit (that part of role I still need to play) knowledge more efficiently and more entertainingly. Thus, "at one level it will appear that the teachers have changed because they hold new knowledge as an accumulated attribute" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p.157). However, "at the level of knowledge as expressed in practice little may have changed" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p.157). Thus, despite the good intentions from above and the generous new trust, I still did not/do not feel I was/am treated as a knower. I was not consulted how I should teach or how I felt about the newly-suggested ways of teaching. I was still only asked to follow orders. What changed is the orders, not the relationship between me as a teacher with the professional landscape.

Conle (1996) named two notions of teachings: "one being the transmission of a discipline and the other being personal connections with others" (p.302). I feel I have always been living in a landscape that asked me to "transmit a discipline" and I have been longing to live in a landscape that valued the "personal connections." When the "sacred story" and teachers' "personal practical stories" do not match, it should not be a surprise that there are tensions and "bumping stories" in and out of classrooms.

Clandinin and Connelly (1998) and Steeves (2000) explored a "narrative understanding of school reform," where they "re-imagined school reform from a different perspective, from the place of teachers' knowledge embedded in context such that teacher voice might be a shaping influence on both theory and practice" (Clandinin & Huber, 2005, pp.44-45).

Carter (1993) also thinks teachers' voices should be heard. She speaks of the term "voice" in two levels. "At one level, the issue of voice centers on the extent to which the languages of research on teaching, with their emphasis on general propositions, allow for the authentic expression of teachers' experiences and concerns" (p.8). Here, like Clandinin and Connelly (1998), Carter believes teachers' voices are linked to their experiences, where their "personal practical knowledge" dwells. In this sense, if teachers' voices are to be heard, they should have room to talk about their experiences. Carter continues to talk about the second level of teacher voice:

> At a second level, the issue is one of discourse and power, that is, the extent to which the languages of researchers not only deny teachers the right to speak for

> and about teaching but also form part of a larger network of power that functions for the remote control of teaching practice by policymakers and administrators. (p.8)

Carter's words remind me of Clandinin and Connelly's (1996) "in-classroom" and "out-of-classroom" metaphors in teachers' "professional knowledge landscape." As mentioned above, Clandinin and Connelly see the "out-of-classroom" place as filled with "sacred stories," the kind of stories that dominate teachers' curriculum; they see "in-classroom" place as filled with "secret stories," where teachers and students are safe from the "scrutiny" of the sacred stories. Carter's second level of teacher voice seems to hint that there is danger that even in the "in-classroom" place the dominating "sacred story" is still at work. This is, unfortunately, exactly how I felt in my classrooms. Imagine a landscape where both "out-of" and "in-" classrooms were scrutinized, where the only chance for occasional "secret stories" are played only under "cover stories." Teachers' voices were hard to be heard in that landscape.

In our teaching landscape, expert teachers will drop into our non-expert teachers' classrooms any time they want without invitation and without notice. They usually come in a team of two or three. They sit in non-expert teachers' classes to observe and report to authorities what we non-expert teachers are doing in our classes. In this way, we non-expert teachers are always "under control." It is also believed that in this way non-expert teachers could have a chance to learn from expert teachers, especially when they point out the weaknesses in our teaching. If experts sit in my classrooms with fierce watching eyes to fill in our "Zone of Proximal Development" (Vygotsky, 1978), I felt

they are going in the wrong direction. Vygotsky defined "Zone of Proximal Development" as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). However, there is a difference between "expert guidance" and "expert condemnation." In "expert guidance" where non-expert teachers *collaborate* with "more capable peers" there is free space for discussion and sharing. In our landscape, however, when non-expert teachers are talked to *after* classes are over, they most times receive comments on their weaknesses. This feeling of being watched by fault-finding eyes, or being scrutinized, does not make it easy for non-expert teachers to "grow," or even to regularly teach. The blurring concepts of "expert" and "non-expert" teachers make the situation even more confusing. Right now in our landscape it seems that the definition for "expert" teachers is "retired, or close to retired" teachers. While we "non-expert teachers" abhor being observed by "expert teachers," some "expert teachers" who were newly "promoted" to this title were also reluctant to perform this prescribed role. I heard from one such newly promoted teacher how he had to make special time to sit in younger teachers' classes, where he knew he was not wanted, and where he hated what he was doing. However, just as we "non expert teachers" do not have a choice of not being scrutinized, the "expert teachers" do not have a choice not to observe. Similarly we are experiencing the "stratification of expertise" that Schecter (1997) was so distressed about. Our "non-expert teachers" and some "expert teachers" "personal

stories" are being interrupted by the "school stories" and 'sacred stories." From studying these "bumping stories" I try to understand our (reform) educational landscape (Clandinin & Huber, 2005).

Besides the tensions between the "interrupted" school stories and personal stories (Clandinin & Huber, 2005), I also felt the dilemmas in teaching. One dilemma is what I should choose to care about in my teaching. If teaching is relationship (Carter, 1993), and if teachers' professional knowledge landscape has "a history with moral, emotional, and aesthetic dimensions" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999, p.2), then teaching is also caring (Noddings, 1984; Schultz, 1997; Clandinin, 1994). Unfortunately, however, mere rules cannot help teachers to care, and sometimes rules may even stand in the way of caring. As Schultz (1997) suggests, "we must know also when to discard rules in order to deal in caring ways with the needs of others with whom we are in relation" (p.85). Noddings agrees:

> The one-caring is dependable, not capricious. Her principles are guides to behavior, and she sees clearly that their function is largely to simplify situations, to prevent hundreds of similar questions from arising. She sees, also, that they may be of little use if a serious question actually arises. (p.56)

Sometimes the "rules" or "principles" Schultz (1997) and Noddings (1984) discuss about are connected with the "sacred stories" Clandinin and Connelly (1996) refer to. With the traditions I am inheriting, I have to choose what to care, since different stories seem to give me dissimilar directions.

The "sacred story" tells that students need to pass various levels of standard exams to go to universities. The "job story" follows that only people with higher level of diplomas are considered. In my mind the "students' school story" says "we need to go to universities and get jobs." The "students' personal story" says "we need to grow, to be connected, to be cared, alas, as people." The "teachers' cover stories" says, "I am doing the best I can to deliver the knowledge." The "teachers' secret stories" says, "Teaching is relationship. I care about my students. What are my students' lives? Where are our teachers' lives?" The "teachers' moral story" is puzzling: "Do I teach or do I deliver?"

There are a lot of stories happening in the landscape. However, I feel not enough stories are being shared and told. I feel it is time we teachers tell the stories, and ask that our stories be heard. The stories matter to us; they matter to our teaching; and they matter to the educational reforms that we envision.

CHAPTER THREE:

NARRATIVE INQUIRY

In this study, I am trying to piece together the puzzle of how the places, times and relationships shaped who I was as a student and who I was/am/will be as a teacher; and the relationship between who I was/am/will be as a teacher and who I was/am/will be asked to be by the educational landscape. In doing this, I am trying to inquire into my personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985), my curriculum making on the professional knowledge landscape of English teaching in a university in China (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), and my identity (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). This puzzle of the relationship between my personal practical knowledge, my curriculum making and my identity is the starting point of the narrative inquiry. I will also study the experiences of two other English teachers using a similar inquiring approach, that is, narrative inquiry. "Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 18). Narrative inquiry helps inquirers to understand "a person's experience in relation to others and to a social milieu" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 39). This research puzzle around the relationship of teacher personal practical knowledge, curriculum making on the professional knowledge landscape, and teacher identity is an important one to explore if we are to understand the dilemmas teachers experience as reforms in English language teaching are

implemented in China, in a similar way as Clandinin and Huber (2005) showed in the Canadian context.

The Beginning of My Written Narratives

To begin my own story of where I came from and who I was as a student is no easy task for me. "We like to think that a good life will fashion itself into a text. It won't" (Zinsser, 1987, p.26). When a "good life" cannot even fabricate itself into a written text, mine, with its a few turns, should not be expected to do any better. But I only realized this once the process had begun. When it was time to write, I suddenly felt that I had too much to say.

> 'The autobiographer's problem,' Russell Baker says, 'is that he knows much too much; he knows the whole iceberg, not just the tip.' Annie Dillard says, 'The writer of any first-person work must decide two obvious questions: what to put in and what to leave out.' (Zinsser, 1987, pp. 24-25)

At this stage, my narrative response group (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) helped me. I was at the Research Issues table one Tuesday afternoon, sharing my difficulties in writing a narrative account of my experiences when I noted that I could share orally at the table with more ease. Shaun, another doctoral student at the table, said to me, "Have you ever recorded your oral stories?" (S. Murphy, personal communication, Edmonton, September 16, 2003). That sounded promising. That afternoon I took a digital recorder, and talked to it for the whole afternoon, first in my office, and later on the lawn of the University of Alberta campus. It was a strange experience to talk to a recorder, but I tried

to imagine I was talking into interested and supportive ears like those of people at the Research Issues table. I tried to play the "believing game" (Elbow, 1986) to persuade myself to keep talking without any extra worry about the logic of my stories and the grammar mistakes in my language. I was mainly talking to myself in English, though I used Chinese whenever I struggled to find the English terms. The transcription of these recorded stories was a mess, but at least I had some written words to work with (Narrative account based on field texts, September 16 - 29, 2003).

At another Tuesday Research Issues table, I shared one part of my written story about a turning point in my high school life. I read how my father begged for a chance for me to study in an academically-better-reputed school, how I felt for the first time how powerless my father and my family was, and how my life was changed after the incident because I set my goal to earn good grades to regain my father's dignity. After I read the story, I heard myself sharing how I felt similar difficulties in preparing for my candidacy. Then suddenly all the pressures that I had felt all those years rushed to me. I lost control of my voice and burst into turbulent tears. That lasted probably thirty seconds, but I felt it was like half an hour. While I was trying to get back control of myself, I was afraid that I was embarrassing me and the sharing group. When I finally was able to wipe my tears with the tissues handed to me, I saw understanding and supporting eyes. It was so important to me that the eyes I saw were understanding and supportive ones, not mocking or embarrassed ones. There came encouraging comments and marvels about how far I had gone from my little town. Then Yi Li, another doctoral student at the table, began to

share another story that my stories reminded her of, and the discussions and stories went on (Narrative account based on field texts, November 4, 2003). Somehow, I was comforted and encouraged from that tearful moment. I was able to go back to my writing again.

Living in the Field

After my candidacy, I went back to China to live in the field. I continued to teach English as part of my "dual experience": "the inquirer experiencing the experience and also being a part of the experience itself" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 81).

I continued to write and reflect upon my past life experiences, while I kept journals and notes of my ongoing teaching and living experiences. As I wrote and reflected I came to new perspectives on personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988) and strengthened awareness of "teaching as a relationship" (Carter, 1993), which could run into the "sacred story" and the "school story" with some interrupting bumping waves (Clandinin & Huber, 2005). There were quite a few bumping stories in my "new" teaching life, which I share later. These contrasting stories further reminded me that narrative inquiry is not just telling and retelling stories. "Narrative inquiry in the field is a form of living, a way of life" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 78).

While I was living, telling, retelling and reliving my own experiences as I tried to understand my stories to live by, I invited two participants to my study. I first contacted Huai.

Huai and I had been colleagues for many years. We were both from the same city (though our home towns were hours away by train). We both graduated from the same university (she a few years after me). We both had some North American living/studying experiences. Huai and I had similar backgrounds. While I recognized these similarities, the major reason I wanted to invite Huai into my study was because we had been on good talking terms. However, since I started this doctoral journey, we had not been in contact. Were we still on good terms? Would we still be comfortable talking to each other? Could our new relationship (researcher/participant, or co-researchers) change how we trusted/saw each other?

On the phone I briefly introduced to Huai what I was doing and my intention of inviting her into my study. Huai's voice was with the familiar friendliness and she almost immediately accepted my invitation on the phone. But I realized the importance of telling her more about my studies, and of warning her of the potential "jeopardy" she might run into. "This confronting of ourselves in our narrative past makes us vulnerable as inquirers because it makes secret stories public" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 62). As we open the shells and covers, we challenge our "perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing sel[ves]" (p. 62) and present the inner parts of ourselves for readers to see and feel. Huai needed to understand that narrative inquiry was a process in which both inquirer and participant could be vulnerable. Huai and I were both working in the same department where our teachers' stories would unfold. I decided to talk to Huai about the ethical concerns in person.

I was sharing an office with about fifteen other teachers, and Huai was sharing her office with about thirty other teachers. We decided to meet in the Teachers' Room. This Teachers' Room is for all teachers who teach on this floor to use. The official who looked after this room was a woman whose private area was set apart from the rest of the room by a row of wardrobes, and who can choose to "hide away" or to be seen. Whenever I walked in the room, I had a weird feeling that I was being watched and listened to from a corner. However, I found it the only option for our purposes.

Huai signed her name to join my study in that room. And there on the late afternoon of May 13, 2004, we had our first conversation. Because it was late afternoon, the whole floor of the building was quiet and we felt we had the room all to ourselves. I had two recorders: one big tape recorder I borrowed from my office and the digital one I always carried. While I was finding a plug-in place for the big tape recorder, the secretary taking care of the room came in. I greeted her warmly, reintroducing myself as an English teacher (I had been away for a few years) and asked her if it was OK if we used *her* room for a talk. To give more reason for us to use the room I added that the talk was related to our teaching. She was in a good mood and gladly agreed and asked me to lock the room afterwards. She then gathered her stuff and left. Huai and I had the room to ourselves. We were not disturbed until we finished our talk for that afternoon.

I found myself speaking Chinese to Huai. It just felt natural and comfortable for me to use Chinese to talk to her. I first introduced my recorders to Huai, especially the digital one that I bought in Canada. Huai said she had a similar one, and reminded me

with a smile China was moving fast and in certain areas even ahead. But I still had to introduce Huai to the recorders, commenting on the strange feelings those things could sometimes arouse.

I had in front of me a few pieces of paper: one for the initiating questions I prepared in case we were stuck and the other pieces were for field notes. I talked to the recorder about the date and time and that I and Huai were about to have our first conversation. I talked to the recorder in English (as a reminder that this study was initiated on a Canadian campus). Then we looked at each other and smiled. I had to start. I talked casually and as to a friend. However I wanted my message to be concise and clear. I spoke in Chinese. "uh … you know I am doing a narrative research … at this stage I have written some of my stories … like my home town, where my parents are from … my elementary school …and I want to know a little bit about your early life stories … anything that you can remember … like … your home town … your first school …" (Translation of conversation, May 13, 2004). Huai took the cue and began to share her wonderful stories.

We talked for two hours. Huai spoke almost all the time. I listened intently and responded with my head and small comments. Occasionally I asked her questions to get more details. Huai covered a lot of her school life details. By the time she finished her major teaching stories, it was getting late. I thanked her from my heart and said I would send her the transcriptions and writings by email and perhaps ask for further conversations (Narrative account based on field texts, May 2 - 13, 2004).

While I was working on Huai's stories, I ran into Chuang. Chuang and I were enrolled in the same university as undergraduates in the same department in the same year. We graduated at the same time and both remained in the same department to teach English. Chuang was taking his PhD in a well known university in China then. We ran into each other one afternoon when we were both preparing for the oral interview for possible promotions in our teaching jobs. We later found out that we both failed to get the promotion, so we found we had even more to share with each other. I asked Chuang if he would like to join my study, and Chuang was happy to find someone to talk to.

After the paper work, we wanted to have our first conversation in the same Teachers' Room. This time, however, the official woman was not in a good mood, and, despite my warm pleading of using the room for another "teaching talk," she hinted solemnly that we might think of another room. We could not think of another room, so we decided to take advantage of the good weather and talk on an open chair among the trees and grass on campus. This time I used my digital recorder and a small tape recorder that I borrowed from my wife. After we seated ourselves comfortably on a chair, Chuang led me from his childhood up to where he was after the promotion commotion (Narrative account based on field texts, June 2- 28, 2004).

I had two more conversations with Chuang and two more with Huai in different places on campus. Once a secretary lend her little office to Chuang and I, and once Huai and I used the little closed-in recording room of our department. Despite the different locations, all our conversations were like friendly talks. We felt safe to share to each other

and felt connected. Of the two responses of "me too" or "not me" mentioned by Conle (1996), the former one was frequently used by me. And to be sure there were no "critical analyses or argumentative replies" (p.318) during our conversations. "In this data generation, critical distancing, value judgments, and argumentative stances are out of place. Instead, trust, spontaneity, and interpretive competence will be valued" (Conle, 1996, p. 320). Even the "interpretive competence" did not have a chance to play probably until after I started to write research texts.

Our conversations were mainly in Chinese. Occasionally we used some English words. I did not literally transcribe our Chinese conversations. Instead, I directly translated our conversations sentence by sentence to English. I listened to the talks sentence by sentence, and translated them. Based on the translation of our talks, I wrote their narrative accounts chronologically. Before each new conversation with Huai or Chuang, I sent to them by emails my translation of our previous talks, and the chronological narrative accounts I wrote. I asked them to give me feedback on a) whether they felt my translation of our talks accurately represented our talks, b) whether they felt my narrative accounts about them were fair representation of what they wanted to share, c) whether there were parts of the accounts they did not feel comfortable with and would like to change or leave out, and d) their suggestions for our next talks. I received their feedback when we met or when I phoned them. Each time they both said they felt satisfied with my writing and representation of what they had said. After the third and last conversations with Huai and Chuang, I sent them by emails the translation of our last

talks and my complete narrative accounts based on my three conversations with each of them. Each time I made changes to the accounts, I sent them by emails to Huai and Chuang. Each time I sent them the newly edited accounts, I asked them to give me feedback on a) whether they felt the accounts fairly represented what the wanted to share, b) whether they would like any parts in the accounts to be changed or deleted, and c) whether they had new things to add into the accounts for better representation of their stories. They gave me feedback either when we met in person or when I called them on the phone. They told me they were satisfied with what I wrote.

Because I had known Huai and Chuang for many years, the "negotiating into" their lives as narrative co-researchers (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) was relatively easy. Because we still have a good chance to continue to be colleagues and potentially co-authors, the "negotiating out" is also easier. The tricky part is to protect their anonymity in my studies. Many of my colleagues knew I was back from Canada to do my research work, so I was very careful never to share information regarding with whom I was working with and I generally hinted that I did not encourage questions about details of what I was writing. Chuang and Huai felt satisfied with the way we cooperated and the way I named them in my writing.

Composing Field Texts

There are a variety of resources that I could use for field texts for my narrative study:

> We explore the use of . . . stories; autobiographical writing; journal writing; field notes; letters; conversation; research interviews; family stories; documents; photographs, memory boxes, and other personal-family-social artifacts; and life experience—all of which can make valuable field texts. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, pp. 92-93)

I wrote some autobiographical stories while I was preparing for my candidacy in Canada. After I returned to China, I kept journals and notes of my new teaching experiences. I also visited my parents several times. I had talks with my mother and she told me some more details of our family stories (my father is ill and unfortunately can not verbally communicate any more). I also found the diaries that I wrote in high school and university, and two photo albums of my childhood, school years, and university years. Those diaries and photos and even the familiar neighborhood serve as part of my "memory boxes" to remind and help me recollect my past stories. I met and talked to my high school classmates. I also went to my old schools and took pictures of the old and new school yards. These visits, photos, diaries, journals, previous writings, and talks are all part of my wide range of field texts.

For Chuang and Huai, for our conversations, I encouraged them to bring in photos, textbooks, diaries, or any other "memory box" items that could help them remember. For our second talk on August 4, 2004, Chuang brought a grammar book that he had used as a textbook for his teaching. For our third conversation on July 15, 2005, Huai brought an English article she had used as extra reading materials for a class she taught. Besides the three recorded conversations with each of them, I also had talks with them on other occasions when we met about our teaching, the English teaching reforms, and our lives in

general. Those talks were not recorded, but I kept them in my field texts. Those were also valuable resources for me to understand who they were as teachers.

Composing Research Texts

From field texts to research texts

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) discussed how to turn field texts into research texts in narrative inquiry:

> Whether we read the field texts alone or with new readers, the search for patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes that shape field texts into research texts is created by the writers' experiences as they read and reread field texts and lay them alongside one another in different ways, as they bring stories of their past experiences forward and lay them alongside field texts, and as they read the field texts in the context of other research and theoretical works. (p. 133)

In trying to "cut and prune an unwieldy story and give it a narrative shape" (Zinsser, 1987, p.24), I wrote Huai's and Chuang's narrative accounts chronologically based on my first two conversations with each of them. At that stage I wrote their entire stories in the third person. On May 17, 2005, after I received permission from Huai and Chuang, I sent the first draft of my dissertation by emails to my supervisory committee: Dr. Wu, Dr. Blair and Dr. Clandinin. Among their other guidance and suggestions, Dr. Blair commented that I did not give Huai and Chuang their own voices in their stories and that it was always *I* telling *their* stories. She also pointed out that Huai's stories were not strong enough (H. Blair, personal communication, Internet, June 20, 2005). Likewise,

Dr. Clandinin pointed out there was a lack of tension in Huai's stories. She also suggested that I find more details about Huai's and Chuang's teaching experiences. Dr. Wu suggested that I explore deeper into Huai's language learning and living experiences in America. With their suggestions and guides, I prepared specific topics and had the third conversation with both Huai and Chuang.

Working on Dr. Blair's comments that I did not give Huai and Chuang their own voices in their stories, I changed the major part of their narrative accounts from third person to first person. I found that by changing the major parts of their stories from third person to first person, I became more empathetic with Chuang and Huai. I was thinking and writing as if I were them. By changing to the first person, I also found it easier to cut and shift different parts of their talks to make their points clear. As a writer, at that stage, I felt more freedom to use my moral judgment to finish the narrative form. However, while I enjoyed the new power of becoming the "first person" writing their stories, I was also aware a new danger I was in. The danger was my abuse of the power and my making their stories into *my* stories, which would be quite the opposite of what I was trying to achieve: to give *them* voice. (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.10) To make sure that the stories I wrote represented Huai's and Chuang's experiences fairly and in a balanced way (Schultz, 1997, p.95), I sent them to Huai and Chuang. They both said they were happy with what I did.

In thinking back, the use of third person and the using of only their own words limited my "cutting and pruning" and giving the story "a narrative shape." There were

times when I knew exactly where they were going, but I could not connect the threads because *they* did not say them. Writing another person's story in this sense is much harder than writing my own. When I write my own stories, I could always add too, or leave out, certain parts that I see fit, and they are still *my* stories. But to represent another person's story is more delicate. However, at certain stages "the writing and telling of the narrative data need to be done spontaneously and without fear of judgment" (Conle, 1996, p.315). This is not saying that narrative inquirers are not bound by moral and ethical concerns in their writing.

Truth and ethical concerns

Zinsser (1987) wrote stories about his grandmother which were greatly different from his mother's version. Zinsser (1987) said, "The truth is somewhere between my mother's version and mine. But she [Zinsser's grandmother] was like that to *me* – and that's the only truth that the writer of a memoir can work with" (p.17).

Here I do not want to run into discussions about whether there is Truth in our lives. I found this question has fundamental links with people's religious beliefs. And if there is Truth in some people's lives, they probably do not see why they need to argue or prove it, although they would not say that Truth is Truth only when you believe there is Truth. For them, whether you believe it or not, there is Truth. And for people who do not think there is Truth in the universe, they would not like to change their belief until Truth is proved either logically or practically to them, which the Truth holders do not care to do.

But back to narrative truths, I share with Zinsser (1987) that the same relationship stories in our past leave different shades, impressions and influences on different people connected with them, or even to the same person in different space/time contexts. Indeed, my research effort is to put our stories into the contexts, or what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) called the three-dimensional narrative space (p. 50), always realizing that "other tellings could be told from alternative positions" (Clandinin & Huber, 2005, p.50). In fact, each writing and retelling of the past reinvents and changes the past memories a little bit:

> If you prize your memories, Annie Dillard says, don't write a memoir – the act of writing about an experience takes so much longer and is so much more intense than the experience itself that you're left only with what you have written, just as the snapshots of your vacation become more real than your vacation. You have cannibalized your remembered truth and replaced it with a new one. (Zinsser 1987, p. 27)

If Annie Dillard's caution is to be taken seriously (rather than humorously), then it might be extended even further: if you prize your memories, do not even orally tell or even try to remember them, because each retelling or each reliving within one's own mind might have already changed the memories because of the changed circumstances and contexts. I know this sounds absurd. I know we do need to remember, relive and retell our memories. And we know that each retelling changes the past stories a bit. So what shall we story tellers do?

I think the best way is to admit it. We can admit that for past stories, there is hardly the only truth about it. Each retelling is a reinterpretation. Indeed, we cannot even avoid interpretation in telling our past. The "objective" truth in past stories, if there are

any, is beyond human grasp. We cannot avoid interpretation. However this does not mean that we can interpret our stories any way we want. Carter (1993) says,

> Despite our fondest wishes, we cannot escape the problems of interpretation and meaning either by ignoring them or by claiming to have overcome them. We can only deal with them self-consciously and directly, using whatever tools we can to track their influence on our thinking and resisting as strenuously as possible the impulse by ourselves and others to elevate a particular interpretation to the status of doctrine. (p.10)

This has become a morality test on narrative inquirers then. This moral test relies on how the researchers care about her/his research, how he/she cares about his/her co-researchers or participants, and how he/she cares about representing the stories in the fairest and most balanced way (Schultz, 1997, p.95).

Caring, researcher-participant relationship and interpretation

Schulz (1997), after a careful review of the ethic of caring (See Noddings, 1984, 1987, 1991, 1992; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, 1990; Clandinin, 1994; Brody et al., 1994), confirms the relationship between researchers and participants should not based on fixed rules, but that "how we relate to family and friends should ... become our model for a caring relationship, and a primary fidelity to persons should guide our thinking during research" (p.83). Schulz further explains:

> Although we have a responsibility to attempt to anticipate ethical problems and to conduct ourselves with integrity in the face of problems, we cannot possibly articulate in advance all the ethical dilemmas that might emerge during a study. Neither can we rely on rules and regulations to solve dilemmas arising unexpectedly out of the complex interactions of human relationships. It is the values that undergird our research methods and behaviors toward research

> participants that can guide us through the complexities of a situation. The ethical guidelines we follow in our personal lives as we deal in caring ways with family and friends can also guide us in our professional work. (p.110)

As a narrative inquirer, I try to care for my participants in the same way that I care for my families and friends, and I try to negotiate narrative accounts with my participants as I would with my families and friends. The best comment that a caring researcher can get from her/his participants, is probably that it was good to have been listened to by a friend and that it was nice to have their pieces gathered together truthfully by a friend (Morrison, 1987, pp. 272-273).

This caring for participants, however, brings us back to the topic of faithful interpretation or accounts of past events. By being faithful and caring to my participants, was I maneuvering their stories to please them and to create "narrative smoothing" where "all threads meet happily"? (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.10) This question, again, cannot be answered by following rules, but by the values that the researcher holds. When discrepancies and dilemmas do occur, the researcher can only try to face it in a caring way as he/she cares for his/her own family members. As Clandinin and Connelly (1988) explains, "the research intention is to reconstruct the meaning ... from the point of view of the actor rather than to judge the act from an external point of view" (p.271).

However, despite the good intentions from researchers to care for their participants, and to reach a co-researcher, partner, and friend relationship with participants, as Schulz (1997) realizes, there is almost always a "status and power" difference between them. She further explains:

> The university researcher receives a number of tangible benefits: either a completed Ph.D., a reduced teaching load, merit pay, eventual tenure, and/or promotion. The teacher researchers can speak of the rewards of being listened to, of having meaningful conversations, and of sharing their work and thoughts with others. But they receive no salary or work benefits. (p.111)

This part of the relationship between the researchers and the participants is related to the topic of "negotiating out of" the research relationship (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As Clandinin and Connelly noted, the relationship between the researcher and the participants do not end when the study ends. For me, I am looking forward to a long lasting friendship with my participants and a possible co-researching relationship in the future (this, of course, also depends on whether Huai and Chuang see it as a good idea). In the sense I am writing the stories of my two participants based on their oral telling and oral/written feedback, we should already be co-researchers in this study (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988; Schultz, 1997). However, the benefit for me is evident in that I am doing this research for my PhD degree; while materially my two participants do not receive any rewards. Officially they are my participants, not co-researchers, and officially I am credited for this research work. Narrative researchers in this sense might always feel in debt to their participants, just as they might always feel the binding need to care for their own family members.

Composing research texts: continuing efforts

After I had the preliminary forms of our stories, I went back to my research puzzle. My research puzzle is how the places, times and relationships shaped who I was

as a student and who I was/am/will be as a teacher. Furthermore, I would like to find out the relationship between who I was/am/will be as a teacher and who I was/am/will be asked to be by the educational landscape. In doing so, I try to inquire into my personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985), my curriculum making on the professional knowledge of university English language teachers (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), and my identity (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). From the narratives of our past experiences, I am trying to find where we came from, how the contexts decided how we should behave in schools, as students how we should set our goals, and what we put as priorities in our lives. Those are threads that lead to who we were as students. I am also trying to pull out from our stories how our past learning experiences influenced how we teach as starter teachers, how our past teaching experiences continued to shape how we teach, how the educational system expected us to teach, and what discrepancies there were between how we believed we should teach and how we were expected to teach. These are among threads that lead to who we were/are/will be as teachers and what our relationship is with our educational system and its reforms.

As I laid the three narrative accounts side by side, I pulled out threads that seemed resonant across the narratives (what "resonance" means to me as a narrative inquirer I discuss later). Meanwhile, I kept communicating with my supervisor Dr. Wu by emails about my thoughts and ideas, and received constant guidance form him. After I finished

the first draft of this study I sent it by emails to my supervisory committee, who returned their valuable feedback to me by emails and mails.

Working on the feedbacks from Dr. Wu, Dr. Blair and Dr. Clandinin on my first draft of this writing, I conducted the third conversations with Huai and Chuang, re-constructed their narrative accounts, and pulled out more resonant threads from our stories. Then I finished my second draft and send it by emails to my supervisory committee again. I received their valuable feedbacks by mails and emails while I was still in China. On September 7, 2005, I returned to the University of Alberta Campus, where I met with Dr. Wu, Dr. Clandinin and Dr. Blair in person and received valuable face to face help. While on this campus I also continued to join the Research Issues Table. At the table I found resonance in other students'/researchers' stories of their research in progress. I shared my research work with other students/researchers and received helpful comments, suggestions and supports. In several meetings with me Dr. Clandinin, as a "more capable peer" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86) and as a narrative companion (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), read and discussed with me each chapter that I wrote.

Resonance and growth

Conle (1996) sees resonance as a metaphor, which, as a bridge, evokes similar emotions in others' stories, helps teachers to grow by realizing and strengthening/weakening certain parts in their personal practical knowledge, "as a way of seeing one's experience in terms of another" and "an educational process – namely, a

development of self through interaction with others at an intimate level" (p. 299). She states that resonance, as a "dynamic, complex, metaphorical relations" (p.313), "can be a tool in our desire to become more conscious of tacit practical knowledge" (p.315). Here, and throughout Conle's (1996) article, she is using teachers' "tacit practical knowledge" as an identical synonym to what Connelly and Clandinin (1988) called teachers' "personal practical knowledge" (see Conle, 1996, p. 300, p.308). Conle wrote:

> Once we recognize a significance in our formerly tacit stories, we can perhaps have a hand in our personal and professional development by strengthening certain stories and countering others, by letting certain stories run out and bolstering other, more fragile ones. (p.317)

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) agree that studying our past is a way to grow:

> We retell our stories, remake the past. This is inevitable. Moreover, it is good. To do so is the essence of growth and, for Dewey, is an element in the criteria for judging the value of experience. Dewey's reconstruction of experience (for us the retelling and reliving of stories) is good in that it defines growth. Enhancing personal and social growth is one of the purposes of narrative inquiry. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 85)

Indeed, the purpose of this study, besides understanding ourselves as who we were/are/will be, is also with a hope to invoke understanding, emotional relatedness, resonance and growth (Conle, 1996).

CHAPTER FOUR:

NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF MY SCHOOL EXPERIENCES WITH A FOCUS ON LEARNING AND TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

Space of My Living and Learning

I was born and brought up in a town of 30,000 people in a northeastern forest city in China. Our town, Wumahe (乌马河), which means "Black Horse River," is one of the dozens of "forest bureaus" (林业局) of the city of Yichun, which literally means "Thy Spring." The name of our province, of which Harbin is the capital, is Heilongjiang (黑龙江), which means "Dark Dragon River." This is also the name of a real river, which forms part of the boundary between China and Russia. My parents were born and grew up in Shangdong (山东) province, the name of which means "East of the Mountains," which is days of distance from my little town by ship and train when my parents first moved there. Transportation is of course much faster and more convenient today, with more choices from planes and long-distance buses.

My father joined the army in another town in Heilongjiang province and later moved to then-unoccupied Yichun. At that time Yichun needed laborers for the forest industry, which basically meant cutting down and shipping out trees. How my father decided to give up his seemingly bright future in the army and to move to a new place as an empty-pocketed laborer is a story that is worth telling in the later part of this writing. Soon after my father moved to this area, my mother took my elder sister and made a hard

journey to join him. My second sister and I were both born and brought up in Wumahe. Because our little town is walled in by mountains, I used to believe that the whole world is surrounded by mountains.

A little river runs through our town and most of my earliest memories for my childhood now narrow down to some snapshots of my ventures in it. Our town is about ten kilometers from the center of the city. But when I was young, the central city was like another world to me. The train went to the city from our town in the morning and came back in the evening. My mother occasionally went there (probably once or twice a year), and I remember on one occasion I cried and fought so hard to try to go with her. The commuter train was cancelled a few years ago, much to my regret, for I miss those trips that I used to take on the train to school in the city every weekday in my last two-and-a-half years of senior high school life. Winter is extremely cold in our town. Temperatures of minus forty degrees Celsius are not uncommon.

I am the youngest and only son in my family. My two sisters are five and seven years older than I am. There were no kindergartens in our town when we were young, so I spent all of my preschool time running around our neighborhood, playing with children of my own age or older.

My parents are both literate. They subscribed to the local newspaper before I went to school, and the postman delivered it to our home every day. I always feel that my parents are well educated, and it struck me as a surprise when I realized how little

schooling they actually had received. They said they graduated from "high elementary school," by which they meant Grade Four or Grade Five of an elementary school.

My father joined the Communist army as a young man one year before Chairman Mao announced the establishment of the new China in 1949. He was never sent to war. My father was a junior officer in the army until he had to leave it. My father tells a story that their army was stationed in Xunke County (逊克), on the Dark Dragon River, across from the then USSR, today's Russia. Xunke County is not very far from my hometown, but there are no direct roads between them even today. In the 1950s China was enjoying a good relationship with the former USSR who was considered a leading elder brother to China. The story goes that one day in my father's army there was a serious meeting where all the soldiers and officers were present. As one important part of the agenda, some USSR military hats were introduced with great admiration to the Chinese soldiers to try out. While most soldiers either praised the looks of the hats or kept careful silence, my father said honestly that the hats looked like shit on Chinese soldiers' heads. That was a big shock to the officers who felt my father was talking back. My father was facing severe punishment and he decided to leave. He had to leave because of his eagerness to express his opinion (commonly known as his fast temper), and his contempt for pretentious authorities. My father left without claiming all his army service history, thinking he could start all over again with his laboring hands in a new place. He did not know that his personal archives, which he had to carry and show to find jobs in any part of China, were marked by very unfavorable comments, which foretold my father's

difficulties in his next decade of life. Because it was his choice to leave and to live in a new place, my father (and later on my mother and my two sisters who were born before me) could not be registered as lawful citizens in the new place. At that time the government gave rations of food and other necessities to each family according to how many people were registered in the registration book (户口本). To retain better control of people moving from one place to another, the government refused to register people in the new place to which they moved (in an effort to force these people to move back to their original place of residence). People who moved to a new place and, therefore, lost their registration were called "blind movers" (盲流). Children of the blind movers also became blind movers, even if they were born after the parents moved to the new place. These blind movers had to pay for food at a much higher "negotiated price" (议价). My parents had to work very hard to keep themselves and my sisters alive. They also helped to support my paternal grandmother. My father had four brothers and one sister, and they shared the responsibility of supporting my grandmother. Later, at my mother's insistence, my father went to Harbin and even as far as Beijing to ask for the return of his citizenship and to reclaim his service history in the army. He used to tell me of all the hardship and insults he had to endure to get his record and citizenship back. Those trips are my father's stories and they became strong family stories. The firm and consistent encouragement from my mother also set the tone for her contributions to our families. This was manifested once again when I was facing crisis in my senior high school and would have given up without my mother's persistence.

My father regained his, and therefore our whole family's, citizenship in the year that I was born (1970), and, in my father's words, I was the lucky one.

My parents always planned for and encouraged me to become well educated. One of my neighbors' and my parents' friends' favorite questions was, "Which university do you want to go to when you grow up?" Thus the notion that I would go to a university was certain; the question was which one I would attend. I believe that early encouragement and trust in my intelligence helped me to do well in school, especially in elementary school.

We lived in a cottage with one *kang* (炕) room and a kitchen, without running water or a drainage system (the local government installed the running water system for the majority of the town in about 2001). My mother cooked by burning wood under a big iron boiler. The smoke and heat then went under the *kang* to the chimney, which heated the brick- and mud- made *kang* and made it warm and comfortable for sleeping. We had a well near our first living place, and when we moved to a new living unit, my father had a pump installed in our kitchen, which was later given up because of water contamination from a nearby factory. Our new living place was assigned to us by my father's working unit in 1981. With the economic reform of China, my father's working unit sold full ownership of houses to the occupants in 1994. Because my parents had lived in the place for some years, and with the usual depreciation from normal use of the house, they bought it at a fairly low price, which my second sister helped to pay. This house where my parents are living today is made of bricks and tiles, instead of mud and straw as in our

old cottage. It is like several bungalows joined together, with separate front doors and separate front yards for each family.

Each living unit consists of a big and a small *kang* room and a kitchen. A few years ago when I visited my parents' home, the inside look of one of my parents' neighbors' living unit looked strange to me. It was only months later when I realized that the strangeness came from the lack of a *kang* and the placement of beds in the room instead. It was unusual to see beds in the bungalows in my hometown, although it is equally unusual to see *kangs* in the cities.

My father did labor work for a living, like most of our neighbors. After he asked for our citizenship back, he was, most of the time, a team leader in the construction unit. He was known to most of his fellow workers and superiors as a man with a fast temper and a sense of justice. He was also a good speaker. I was proud when my father went to the parents' meetings of our elementary school and spoke before all the teachers and parents. He also made his voice heard in various meetings in his construction unit.

My mother mostly did housework and took care of my sisters and me. But she also did some seasonal labor work such as cutting grass and weeding, especially before we received citizenship. The quantity of food was never a concern to us, although we probably did not have enough variety. We were not doing any worse or better than most of our neighbors. Most people in the town were happy and almost carefree then (at least to my mind at that time).

Things became tough again when I went to university. My sisters were married by then and lived in their own places. My father was retired and had to rely on his pension to support my university expenses. There were no student loans then.

My father began to grow old when I was in university. I believe that he worried too much about supporting me. He could do very little to find extra money. However, he did not want to stay helpless, so he went to the mountains, cut off shrubs, and carried them back home on his bicycle, which was his main vehicle until he was physically too weak to use it. Our home did not need all the shrubs for cooking or heating, and my father sold some of them. The little money that he made could not help much, but he wanted to keep busy and to help in a way that he could.

He also missed me. One winter vacation I did not go home but remained in the university. Because there was no telephone in our home at that time, I could not tell my parents soon enough about my decision, and my father went to the bus station several times a day for two weeks in case I might be on one of the buses.

One of the happiest moments in my father's life was probably when I received the letter of admittance from the university. He took me to visit several of his old friends in our town. I was very embarrassed to be shown as a trophy in this way. My father saw my annoyance and apologized for it, but he could not conceal his joy and victory in life. He was proud of me and was happy that I helped him keep his biggest promise in life. He helped me obtain the chance to study in a better reputed senior high school with a promise that I be a top student. This story is also the turning point in my life, details of

which I will return to later. Another great joy that my father could not hide was when my daughter was born. He insisted on coming to the city I was living in to visit me and my daughter when she was only one month old. My wife and I were living in a very small apartment then, and we were so busy learning to be new parents that I was not ready to receive any visitors, even my parents. However, my father said he would do anything to have a first look at the baby. When I met my parents in the train station, my father was such an old and amiable man walking with the help from a stick, so far from the fast-tempered image that I had in mind, that I almost felt sorry for him. Now when I think back, I believe my father made the right choice. After returning to their home, my father soon suffered from cerebral hemorrhage and could not travel anymore. I always hoped that my parents could wait a little longer until I could afford a bigger apartment and then to come and visit me. My bigger apartment is yet to come, but time never stops in changing people's age and physical conditions.

Elementary School Life

In my elementary school years I was a top student and I was confident. I was always eager to answer the teachers' questions in class and to cooperate with my teachers in any other ways. I performed on stage and spoke as a student representative for our school meetings. My teachers appreciated and loved me. Despite occasional bullying from some big boys, I was quite popular with my classmates. I was overall a bright and happy boy during my elementary school years.

The first little problem I had in school was with Pinyin, our Chinese sounding alphabet to help us to learn how to pronounce Chinese characters. However, for me it was easier to learn the Chinese characters, including their pronunciation, than to learn to use Pinyin. I could read each single alphabet easily, but my difficulty with it was that I could not sound out two separate phonemes when they were put together to produce a new sound. I struggled with Pinyin for many days until I realized that I could read the Chinese characters and pretend that I was reading from the phonetic Pinyin alphabets accompanying them. With practice, I learned the Pinyin system with the help of Chinese characters, though the process is supposed to be the other way around. Because I could read the Chinese words, I was able to figure out what combined sounds different Pinyin units could produce when put together. Afterwards, Pinyin did become a good tool for me to learn to pronounce new Chinese words and to look up words in a Chinese dictionary. Even when I was having difficulty with the Pinyin system, I never doubted that I was a bright pupil in our class, and my grades were not much affected.

English was introduced to us when I was in Grade Three. I longed to learn it well, in the same way that I longed to learn the other subjects. Our English textbook began with the English alphabet, which is similar to our Chinese Pinyin phonetic system. Pinyin actually was not a traditional Chinese product, but came from the western alphabet. But to me then, because we had learned and mastered Pinyin first, Chinese Pinyin was what I drew on for help to learn the English alphabet. Following the alphabet, our English texts continued with phrases such as "a box, two boxes, three pencils," with pictures helping us

understand the meanings of the phrases. The latter part of the textbooks contained short paragraphs with simple phrases and sentences.

I enjoyed reading English words and phrases and sentences, and they were easy enough for me to learn, but I did not enjoy spelling. I was never patient enough to sit still and copy words, either Chinese or English. Some English words that were short and which were learned in the early part of the course I could spell pretty well, but most of the longer words that appeared in the later part of the textbook I could not spell, though I could probably spell some of them in an estimated way. Some of my classmates, whom I never considered academic threats, could spell most words in English, much to my amazement and surprise, since I thought we were all just *pretending* that we knew how to spell them. My second sister amazed and surprised me in a similar way when I found she could actually start and *finish* a thick book, either a novel, or a students' reference book. My second sister was also doing very well in school, but I think that she was not always *the* best in her class, as I was.

English in elementary school was not a major subject. The major subjects were Chinese and math, which were taught by our master class teacher (班主任) several periods a day each of the weekday. Other subjects such as music, drawing, physical education, and English were taught by separate subject teachers only once or twice a week. Because English was not a major subject, the students and the English teacher were under less pressure. The teacher emphasized how well we could read English texts rather than how well we could memorize English words. English essay writing was almost

never practiced, and I was able to enjoy doing well without too much effort. I had always done well in reading Chinese aloud, and the same loud voice also seemed to work well for my English reading.

My teachers' voices were always full of confidence and trust when they called out my name to answer a question (at least to my ears), either in my English class or any other subject class. I also won prizes for being a "good student in all three aspects" (三好学生)，meaning morality, academic achievements, and physical development. Usually the three aspects would shrink into one and students with good grades could win. I was proud of myself, and I knew my family was proud of me too. Though the eagerness to show off my talents made me a victim of bullying from some boys, I managed to overlook it. I enjoyed my relationship with other classmates, and moved on in the self-confident and sometimes a triumphant way.

I was especially in friendship with those students who lived far from our town, in more rural and lonesome areas usually closer to the mountains. I often visited their homes by bike on Sundays and was very welcomed and enjoyed many happy lunches there. Many of them were welcomed by my parents in my home as well. I enjoyed relationships with those boys not because they were earning good grades, but because they were honest, simple, and easy to make friends with. With my good grades, praises from my teachers, and friendship with some of my classmates, I was a natural, confident and joyful little boy in my elementary life.

Junior High School

The little I had learned about English in elementary school dwindled to the English alphabet song by the time I went to junior high school. In junior high school, English became one of our major subjects, included in all term and entrance exams, unlike the much more informal and mostly-for-fun English classes in elementary school. Botany, zoology and physiology each lasted one year in the three year junior high school. Geology and history both lasted two years. Chemistry and physics were introduced in the later two years. We also had music and physical education. In music class we mostly learned some Chinese songs sentence by sentence following our music teacher. Physical education consisted of us wandering on the playground or wildly chasing a ball among forty or fifty classmates. I can still remember how thick and boring our botany and zoology textbooks were. They were dense expository texts in black and white. They were written in a serious and businesslike tone. No real plant or animal was ever brought to our classrooms. I would spend days and even months trying to guess what a pistil or an embryo looked like in real life, since the academic dissection pictures in our textbooks offered me no clues. Geology and history courses consisted of memorizing uninteresting facts. I was not patient enough to memorize these facts when they were introduced. However, I did try and successfully re-learned a lot of facts from geology and history textbooks during one summer vacation. Now that I think back, the efforts were all wasted since those two subjects were not included in our senior high school entrance exams, and all the facts I learned by heart were forgotten a few months later. My physics teacher

showed up only a few times during the one year course, and the few times when he showed up, he was too sleepy and careless to teach, with the consequence that we did not learn much in that subject. In fact my whole last year of junior high school was almost academically wasted, with perhaps the exception of math, which was taught by our master teacher. Though he paid no attention to our overall performances in other courses, he did a very good job in his own class. And because in math I did not have to remember a lot of facts after class, with the major formulas all explained clearly by our teacher in the class and therefore remembered by me easily, I did very well in it.

Our English textbooks in junior high school did not continue with what we had learned from elementary school, but began with the English alphabet again, much to my encouragement and delight. The first English book in junior high was thicker compared to the elementary one, with more words and grammar and longer sentences and paragraphs in the later part of the book. I did pretty well in reading the English texts, but I did not memorize the grammar details and could not spell all the English words we learned. I could not make English sentences, either orally or in written form. However, I was still one of the best in it in those days, and did quite well in the English exams.

I had my first school transfer experience when I was in the second year of junior high school. When I went to junior high, I was assigned to Class Number Five. Classes Number Five and Six were in adjacent rooms separated by a wall. Children who were offspring or relatives of the teachers were all in Classes Number One and Two. Rumors were that these teachers' children were treated preferentially, whereas the "expendable"

students were sent to higher-number classes. I now understand that I was exploited by the school authority to satisfy my master class teacher: each class should have a few top students to "balance" the classes in students' academic achievements. While our Class Number Five still had regular classes, the adjacent Class Number Six had trouble with discipline. Quite a few difficult students there were working very hard to make trouble for their class and teacher. Their efforts soon extended into our classroom. One Monday morning we went to school as usual but found that the wall between the two classrooms had been broken through, with our blackboard, originally hung on that wall, shattered into pieces on the floor. Obviously the tough guys in Class Number Six finally made their way into our classroom through the wall. In a fury, our master class teacher sent us all home to await further notice for returning to school. I never knew when my classmates went back to school because my father, on hearing the news, transferred me to the other junior high in our town.

There was another story about our English learning before my school transfer that I would like to recall now, since it might help illustrate some confusion over our English teaching and learning at that time. Our English teacher in my first year in Junior High was a very responsible and adequately qualified teacher (Oh yes, we students can always tell☺). But we had a new English teacher in the second year, and in her first class she said that because most of my classmates were not ready to learn Book Two, which was our second year textbook, she would begin with Book One again, which we had finished in the first year. I thought that she was just using that as an excuse and that she was not

ready to teach Book Two. However I also felt sorry for her, since she seemed a fair lady, particular when she showed great sympathy to the few of us who were obviously more ready and eager than the rest to learn Book Two. She actually suggested to me that I should either try to transfer to another class which was taught by another English teacher or to go to another school. This lack of consistence in English teaching made it harder for me to improve my English skills.

Summer Private English Class

In the summer vacation after my first year in junior high, before I was transferred to the other school, I heard of a private English class and joined it with pleasure. The tuition was really cheap, for a month of reviewing and previewing of junior high school English textbooks in five afternoons a week for a total of four weeks, we only need to pay five *yuan*, less than one Canadian dollar. The private school was set up in a yard which was used for storing coal when the coal was carried to the town by train. The coal was for all the factories and households to burn for heating in winter. In summer there was little coal coming and so the yard was mostly empty. Because the yard was really quite big, there was a clearing space in the middle that allowed grass and even vegetables to grow. There was also a row of bungalow houses in the yard, and an English teacher lived in one of them. She was a teacher in our local school, but she had never taught me before that summer class. She was nice and did not pressure us during that summer. I went to the class each day very eagerly.

My major reason for attending that private English class was to memorize the spelling of the English words in our textbooks. This I achieved fairly well. Each afternoon we studied one or two texts. One method the teacher used to help us learn to use the English words was to ask us to translate Chinese sentences into English using the key words we were studying. After she said the Chinese sentences, we would volunteer to orally translate them into English and the teacher would write down our sentences on the blackboard, correcting all the mistakes we made orally. She also explained in detail the English grammar rules that were listed after each English text. I was very happy with the pace of our learning and was able to use the class time to remember the spelling of most English words in the texts. The teacher also negotiated with us what our class content could be. When the teacher suggested she could use class time to teach us more English grammar rules from grammar reference books, which meant we would use less or no time to study the English texts, I was secretly worried because then I would not be able to learn the spelling of words in class time. But I was ashamed to say this out loud. I kept silent and pretended to agree with whatever was agreed on, but I was happy that the teacher's thick grammar books were never used and that we spent most of our time on the textbooks anyway. The class was a very good experience and helped me to continue to be a top student in English. It was informal, and I was liked by my fellow classmates and the teacher. I felt little pressure because we were either covering what I had already learned in the previous term or previewing what I would learn next term. I thought this teacher was a very good English teacher who knew what she was teaching, who pronounced

English words clearly and accurately, and who was the first to give me opportunities to make complete English sentences. She was concerned more about whether we were following her rather than proving to us that she knew English well; she felt secure enough to concentrate on *us* rather than on herself. Looking back, I realize that I have seldom felt so confident in my teaching before my trip to Canada. I was almost always worried about *me* rather than concentrating on my students.

End-of-Junior-High Carnival

In the third and final year of my junior high, in the school that I was transferred to, quite a few of my classmates went wild and frequently interrupted our teachers while they were teaching. Our master teacher had a difficult time restraining the students. Within this environment, my self disciplines loosened. I chatted with my classmates in class and did not memorize the facts in my textbooks. By doing so I seriously risked what then looked like a bright academic future.

Each city in China officially ranks key senior high schools, which accept the top students from the entire city rather than from the local districts only. The elementary and junior high schools are not officially ranked. However each school enjoys a historic reputation and is unofficially ranked by the parents and students according to what percentage of their graduates can enter a key senior high school, which, in turn, guarantees seats to most of their graduates in a university with a good reputation. Parents usually try very hard, and even pay extra money, to send their children to those

high-unofficially-ranked elementary and junior high schools, especially in bigger cities where the competition was tough.

My daughter entered an elementary school with a better reputation, which offers free education only to children living within a few blocks from the school. Children living outside those blocks have to pay a 30,000 *yuan* "school building fee," which is about 5,500 Canadian dollars at the exchange rate when I am writing this thesis. Each year the elementary school gave fifty discounted memberships to the university where I was working, because the university helped build that elementary school. Our university then ranked the teachers who had school-age children according to our titles and years of services in the university. I was lucky enough to be ranked among the top fifty teachers that year with school-age children. I was therefore able to enjoy a big discount and was asked to pay 5000 *yuan,* instead of 30, 000 *yuan,* to send my daughter to that better-reputed elementary school. There is overcrowding in schools with better reputations, which leads to empty classrooms in some less reputed schools.

Senior high schools are officially ranked. Each year citywide students' grades in the standard senior high school entrance exams are publicly reported and ranked, and those students with the best grades can enroll in these highly-ranked key schools. Students with lower but close grades could pay extra money to enter these schools. For example, if the student's total grade is one point lower than the official mark, then the student would probably need to pay 10,000 *yuan*; if it is two points below, then she/he needs to pay 20, 000 *yuan.*

In my home town the two junior high schools could on average send one or two graduates to the key senior high school in the city each year. Several of my junior high school teachers thought I could make it. However, because I did not work hard to memorize facts in the last year of my junior high school, my grades were slightly lower than the requirement to go to that high school, although I was still on top in our local junior high school graduates.

Back then students were not allowed to pay extra money to enter the key city senior high school if our grades were lower than the requirement. Even if it had been allowed, my family would probably not have been able to afford it. In any case, I was to go to our local non-key senior high school.

Senior High School Crisis

When I was in school our little town had three elementary schools, two junior high schools and one senior high school. Today because of the decreased number of school age children, there are two elementary and one junior high school. The only senior high school has been closed. Students in our town all have to go to the city to enter senior high schools. When I visited my parents in the summer of 2004, I walked past the junior high school I was transferred to. I had a very strange feeling when I saw the familiar yellow houses that were our classrooms being used as shops and living quarters.

Because I did not make it into the key senior high school in the city, I went to our local senior high school, still as a top student. Occasionally our local senior high school

could also send one or two graduates to universities, but usually not the famous ones. In order to do well in term exams and the university entrance exams, we had to memorize Marxism rules, Chinese classics, biological facts, chemical elements and formulas, physics rules, and mathematics formulas. For English, we had to memorize English grammar rules, English words and usages. I could follow the teachers very well in all the subjects, and I understood all the rules, and facts; however, I did not want to sit down to learn them by heart after class. I put most of my efforts instead into trying to make myself popular among my classmates and schoolmates by performing on the stage and winning little prizes in various extracurricular competitions. Since I started school I had always been noticed when I earned good grades, helped teachers, and performed on the stage; and I liked that feeling. I liked being noticed and even envied by my classmates and schoolmates.

However, my grades dropped because of my lack of interest in memorizing facts and formulas; although I was still a top student in our class (the competition was not intense in our local school). With those grades I was unable to succeed in the national college entrance exams that I was to take at the end of senior high school. When my grades dropped I could see some attitude change in my classmates and teachers. I felt that I was being judged by the exam results, not by my potential. I wanted a second chance to prove myself; I wanted to be transferred to another school.

My mother vetoed my suggestion that I study in another town where my aunt lived. My father agreed that I could live with my aunt, but my mother strongly disagreed

and she was determined to have a final say in this matter. She believed that my only chance to succeed in school was to live in our own home and to study in a school that had a good reputation for sending students to colleges. Just like her urging helped my father to get back his citizenship and service record years before, my mother was to help me towards a future that she saw as the right one for me.

At this time my father and I gave in to my mother, and we decided to try for the second-best high school in the city. The best ranked senior high school in the city is the provincial-rank Number One Senior High School. This is the one that I failed to enter with my senior high school entrance exams grades. The second-best ranked, the one I was trying to transfer into, is the city-rank Number Two Senior High School. This school normally admits students living in the center of the city, not surrounding towns. My father's connections did not get me a seat in this school, though it did give me a chance to meet the headmaster. During the interview, he asked me a question. I was so nervous I did not hear clearly. I replied with a spontaneous "uh?" The master never repeated his question but showed great annoyance at my not catching his question at the earliest possible moment. I felt awkward and unwelcome. The schoolmaster then asked me which grade I was in. I told him I was in grade two in my senior high school but that I would like to repeat one year if I could enter this one. I was then given some midterm exam papers that the school used as my entrance exams. I spent the rest of the morning finishing those exams and had to wait until the afternoon to find out the result. My parents and I went to a restaurant and I remembered we ordered some dumplings.

Restaurants and dumplings were great luxuries to my family then, but that noon the three of us did not enjoy them and ate with great anxiety. In the afternoon we went to the office again and I remember the headmaster answered me with a set smile. "Your average grades for the papers were a little higher than sixty percent. We could not accept you. We can only register students who get eighty percent or higher."

My parents' and my hearts sank as we heard this. All our pleadings were useless, and we were asked to leave. We did not want to give up, but we were so powerless and lost. My father, with years of experiences with fellow workers, went for help from a man who boiled hot water and watched the gate for the school. The gatekeeper sympathized with my father and told my father the headmaster's home address. My father was eager to receive it, with a strict promise that the source of information be kept secret. I saw no hope in it.

While my mother waited near the restaurant where we had lunch, my father and I went to the headmaster's home. At his home that evening, my father tried so hard to be nice and to please the school principal. He guessed what year the headmaster started work and compared their working experiences to get to know him a little on a personal level. Later on in their conversation my father was in tears and almost was on his knees when he begged for a chance for me and promised that if I did not become one of the top ten students in the class in the first term, we would withdraw on our own.

In my mind, the dignity of my father, of my family, and of my own, was shattered. The image I had of myself, of my father, and of my family collapsed. I began to question

what I was, what my father was, and what my family was in the eyes of the headmaster and in the eyes of others. It was the first time that I had seen my father begging. I had always been proud of my family, especially of my father; he had been a reassuring hero figure in my life. But then and there I realized that he was powerless and had to dishonor himself by begging for my sake. It was a new realization of who I and my family were in this bigger world.

Years later now, I still feel that was the biggest dramatic change point in my life. I became a changed person after that. My happy childhood ended. No longer was I the confident and somewhat naïve, blind, innocent boy. He was replaced by a hurt, silent, goal-driven young student.

City High School Life

The headmaster accepted me. When my father and I ran to tell my mother the good news, she was exalted. We were all excited also because I was sent to Class Number One, a class number I always dreamed about but never went into. My parents and I all knew that Class Number One did not mean the best class, but all through my school years I had been in classes with higher numbers. There were rumors that Class Number Ones were for privileged students and I guess we just wished that one day I could be in a privileged or at least fairly treated class. The headmaster said I could go to Class Number One because the master teacher of that class was a chemistry teacher and she was impressed with the chemical paper I finished at the entrance exam that the headmaster

had given me. Obviously the headmaster reserved at least one positive response to my entrance exams.

My whole life and living strategies changed from the day I finally entered the city senior high school. I had one single goal then: to prove that I was a worthy student with good grades, and in this way to regain my family's dignity. Though the school master never said he accepted my father's promise that if I was not among the top ten students he would let me go, and my father never repeated it to me, I took it as my obligation. I decided that anything that did not move me towards that goal was secondary and would be disregarded.

I went to school each morning either by train or by a school bus which passed our town when it carried students from another town to the city high school. An electricity generating factory was a sponsor in that senior high school so the children of the workers in that factory could go there. Occasionally I also rode a bicycle. It was about one hour's ride on a bike. I had my lunch at school, which was either the lunch box of rice fried with eggs that my mother prepared for me, or the griddled cakes and pickled mustard that I could buy from the grocery store close to the school.

I was at the top in almost all subjects. In the first term exams my average was seventy-two percent, and I was amazed to find that I was the best among the around sixty students in our class. In all the classes at this grade level there was only one other student whose grades were a bit higher than mine. I was surprised because I remembered the headmaster told me they only accepted students whose grades were higher than eighty

percent. My efforts were rewarded with my good grades. I had a good start and I knew the game of earning good grades had just begun and I was full of courage and strength to carry it to the end.

I enjoyed being at the top of the class, but I still tried to keep a low profile. I suppose I was a puzzle to my classmates. I was from another town far from this city school. I was silent most of the time in and out-of our classroom. My determination and concentration on my studies increased with time. In the later part of my two and a half years in that school, I tried not to waste any of my time on what I saw as trivialities inside and outside our classroom. On one occasion one of my classmates had a serious argument in the school hall with another student from a neighboring class. We could all hear the argument in our classroom, and almost all of my classmates became excited and tried either to prevent or to encourage a fight. I was probably the only one who remained silent and who did not pay any attention to the commotion. I refrained from even looking at them. As I saw it the argument had nothing to do with my goal of preparing for my college entrance exams, and I felt that the quarreling students were naïve and foolish. I thought that they could be using their time and energy to improve their academic achievements instead of wasting them on a pointless argument. My lack of emotion must have made my classmates wonder whether I was a normal and caring person. But I consciously worked at maintaining an impersonal image and role as an outsider. I was in fact an outsider because I was from another town, and I wanted to remain an outsider to remind myself of how I had got into that classroom: through my father's begging. I

wanted to keep my wound fresh and my mind determined. I knew that the only thing that counted were my grades in the university entrance exams at the end of senior high school. The other exams for school terms were only bridges leading towards that final goal. My good results in those intermediate exams would not guarantee good results in the final ones. The term grades were not used in determining whether I could go to a university or which university I could enter. Each year there were top students who, for different reasons, could not do well in the entrance exams as they did in the term exams, and who would miss their chances to go to university or to go to a good university. I kept reminding myself of the stories of those sad students who had earned good grades in all exams except the final university entrance exams. Those were sad stories, and though they were told to earn sympathy, I did not want to be in one of them. I told myself I could not lose; I did not have the right to lose.

I dropped almost all of my extracurricular activities and tried my best to avoid the notion of being popular. There were, however, still a few occasions when I was eager to show off. For example, our Chinese teacher seldom called me to read the texts aloud, a privilege I had earlier enjoyed. When we were studying a funny Chinese play and the teacher was calling on students to read it out as in performance, I volunteered for the funny character and made everybody laugh with my exaggerated tone of the "bad guy." However, most times I tried to restrain myself from such eager efforts to make a spectacle of myself. There was another incident in our physics class when the teacher was demonstrating how to solve a certain problem with some formulas. I knew of a simpler

way of doing it and murmured to myself. The teacher called my name in an annoyed tone and asked me to say it out loud if I knew a better method. I stood up and remained silent. I knew that if I told the class my better method the teacher would lose face. Believing I had nothing better to offer, the teacher asked me to sit down and shut up. I do not think he ever realized that I did know better on that particular occasion.

I became very self-conscious in senior high school. I felt more happy and relaxed when I was sitting in the last row of the class, where I thought that my classmates would not notice me. But when I sat in the front row, I was stiff and rigid because I was convinced that everybody was looking at me. In our second year in this senior high school some new students joined our class and we had about seventy people seated in the crowed classroom. The typical seating in our class was for two students to share one big desk, but because there were too many students, we three boys had to sit in the back and share one desk. To solve the problem, my father asked an old friend of his who was a carpenter to make a small desk for me. It was a beautifully handmade little desk. I carried it on the train to my classroom and put it in the aisle at the back of the class. Later, at my teacher's suggestion, I moved to the front and shared a bigger desk with another boy. At the front I was able to hear the teachers and see the blackboard better, but I sat rigidly the whole day because I was so self-conscious. Another student happily inherited my "private" desk at the back. He was not a good-grade student, and he probably had envied me when I was sitting there at the back all by myself. Later on some of my classmates brought in some more small desks and placed them in the same aisle in front of the one I

brought. My master teacher did not like the idea any more, as it became quite difficult to move around in the classroom. My individual desk, though not always occupied by me, was the only one that survived among all the small desks. After I graduated from that senior high school, my master teacher asked for my desk and said he would find it some use in his home.

I had two master teachers in that senior high school. The first one was the female chemistry teacher who appraised my chemistry entrance exam paper. My father was always grateful to her. He also asked me to always to be thankful to her because when we were in difficulty and rejected, she was the one who offered a friendly and trusting hand. In the second year in that senior high school I had a new master teacher. I still remember when he first introduced himself to us, he said with dignity that he was a university graduate. He was a very considerate but firm teacher. He once quoted and confirmed a comment from our monitor that the best way to keep a good relationship was to keep a respectful distance: not too close to and not too far from each other. He commented on the class's performance at the end of each day and warned us of irregular activities and trends when he saw them. There was a time when I enjoyed playing volleyball with several of our classmates at noon and during breaks between classes. Our master teacher commented on that and said we were probably spending too much time playing ball. I immediately quit that practice and concentrated more on my studies.

This male master teacher valued me very much. I was the best student in the whole school year and he wanted to make sure I did not transfer to the other

higher-ranked school. That was a very unnecessary worry because I was happy there and how could I ever transfer to another school with what I had gone through to get here?

My school master showed particular care for me and talked to me in private quite a few times. He commented one day that when I was talking to him, I was pulling back and hiding my true feelings and thoughts. He encouraged me to look to him as an equal. I nodded my head but was thinking, "How can I talk to you as an equal *before* I could prove myself in the entrance exams for the university?" I was hurt in the school transfer experience, and wanted to hide away until I could prove my true worth in the only exams that determined students' values. Meanwhile I was determined to keep silent and to keep all my thoughts and goals just to myself. I did not want my master teacher to find out more about me than the fact that I was earning good grades.

Instead I put my secret feelings and pressures in my diaries. There was one girl in my class who was good at running. I always admired runners. I secretly fell in love with that sports girl. However, I barely had a chance to talk to her. And, even if there had been an opportunity, I was too shy and self restrained to speak. I knew that nothing like a love affair would ever happen to me until after I made my way to the university. In fact, that was a dream I had about university. I dreamed that I would be among all the beautiful, lovely and approachable girls in a university. I also hoped that in university I would not have to memorize the irrelevant facts but study only the subjects that I liked. In senior high school, a big part of my diary was about my admiration for that girl. The other parts of my diaries were my self reproach about not spending all my time and efforts on my

studies and how I thought I would be able to have more choices in my life in a university where I thought I would not have to prove myself anymore and would be able to concentrate on what I was really interested in learning.

After my first term in the senior high school, I had a hard time deciding whether I should take arts or sciences the next term. In the second year of senior high school, students had to choose between sciences and arts, and the university entrance exams would be separate for arts and sciences students. Arts students studied geology and history instead of physics and chemistry. The common subjects for both arts and sciences students were Chinese, English, politics, biology and math. Arts students and sciences students had different levels of math textbooks and exams. I did well in all areas, both arts and sciences, so it was hard for me to choose. There was a general tendency for students to choose sciences first if they felt that they had a chance to succeed in physics and chemistry. There was a saying in Chinese that once one masters math, physics, and chemistry, one can travel around the world without worry of earning a living (学好数理化，走遍天下都不怕). Therefore when I decided to study arts, my classmates persuaded me to change my mind by reminding me that dropping physics and chemistry would be a waste of my talent. I listened to them and switched to the sciences. I then spent most of my time doing physics, math, and chemistry exercises, especially physics, which I felt was my weakest subject even though I excelled compared to my schoolmates.

It was interesting that my grades for the entrance exams did not reflect my efforts: I was very satisfied (and surprised) at my grades in Chinese and English. My grades in

chemistry and physics, in which I spent over five hours almost each day doing problems, were the weakest among my seven subjects. I should probably have enrolled in arts after all.

I cried the night before I took the entrance exams, alone in our yard at night, looking up at the sky, and feeling that I had been trying my best and that there would be nothing to regret even if I was to fail the exams. I also cried after I took the exams (which took three days to finish) before I knew the results because I felt that I had not done very well. There was one multiple-choice question in physics and one in physiology whose answers I was unsure of. I changed my choices several times until I settled on the wrong ones. My regret was so great that I felt all of my exams had been a complete failure. I told my mother that I must have failed to achieve good enough grades for college, and I was making plans for my return to the senior high school for another year to try once more. When I saw my grades, which were much higher than the school's record and much higher than I had ever dreamed of, I could not believe it. I told my father (who always believed me) that the teacher must have made a mistake in copying my grades and that we would play safe and not tell our friends my grades yet. It turned out that those were my correct grades. With those grades I was about to attend a very good university in a big city.

New Strategies of Learning English

In senior high school I found the easiest and most effective way to learn English was to memorize texts, grammar rules and details about the uses of required vocabulary. After I memorized all the texts and grammar details of all the English texts in our textbook, I was always ready to take any exams at any time, without any pre-exam preparations. All our English exams were made within the range of the vocabulary and grammar rules in our English textbooks.

I learned every single English text in our textbooks from that year and previous years by heart and tried to recite as fluently as I could. I used teachers' and other reference books to help me understand the English texts in detail. I actually anatomized all the texts and all the sentences grammatically, and made sure I knew what role each word played in the sentences. I did not read, and did not see any need in reading, any English texts except those in our textbooks. All the required English vocabulary was covered by our English textbooks, and I felt if I could learn my textbooks from cover to cover, I would be completely ready for all my English exams. In fact, I was trying not to know any English word that was not in the required list, lest they would distract my attention and confuse my perfect knowledge for those designated for our exams.

I did not listen to any other sources of English except from our English teachers and classmates. My junior and senior high school English teachers usually did not speak to us in English in our classes, but they read our texts clearly and well. They could tell us in which part of the mouth, nose, or vocal cords each English sound should be

pronounced. The only time that I listened to a tape of our text, I was horrified by the deep male voice of the speaker and never listened to English tapes again before I went to college. It is interesting that I came across that English tape again after I graduated from university as an English major. The same voice sounded natural and beautiful to me at that later time.

English Major

I was accepted by the first department of the first university to which I applied. It came as a surprise to me how undistinguished, unromantic, and unexciting the names of the departments in the universities were when we had to choose our universities and majors before we knew the entrance exam results. I could only judge the majors by their names. When I found "English for Science and Technology" I was happy because I felt by choosing this major I would not have to drop science or English. I did not want to lose my proficiency in either of them. There were several universities that offered this major, and after consulting my second sister and my mother I chose the one closet to my home because I wanted to save traveling expenses.

Once at the end of an elementary school year our teacher asked us to write in Chinese what we would like to be when we grew up. I tried to think of something special and different at which I would excel and that most of my classmates would not conceive of or in which they would not do well. I wrote that I wanted to become an English interpreter. The teacher, as usual, liked my writing and asked me, as she often did, to read

it aloud to my classmates. During my reading I was happy when I saw the surprise on many of my classmates' faces because they had not thought of such a job before. It remains a puzzle to me whether or not this incident had anything to do with my choice of scientific English as my university major.

We were offered several science courses in the university, but as most of my classmates did, I felt quite confused about how much effort and time I should invest in these science subjects. Our science courses were mostly introduction ones with shorter course hours than those for sciences and engineering students. However, I had to spend much more time than the course could justify doing extra exercises and problem solving before I felt I mastered the basic formulas and other contents, a habit I cultivated from preparing for university entrance exams in senior high school. I also needed to review the textbook several times before I could finally learn the rules and formulas by heart, another habit inherited from senior high school. But I could not afford that amount of time and energy because I felt I should put more effort in improving my English, which, after all, was my major part of my major area of study. I thought the science professors covered the contents too rapidly, several dozen textbook pages per class, a much faster pace than our senior high school speed. There were also courses, such as a computer course which we as English majors had little background in and struggled to understand the teacher and the textbook. I managed to do well in the science courses, even earning some excellent grades for some, but was never sure I understood or remembered much from them. Overall, like most of my classmates, I was a little confused about the

arrangement of courses and what we were mainly being trained for. "The objectives for English-as-major courses are to train qualified and higher level personnel working as interpreters, researchers, teachers, administrators in fields of foreign service, business, culture, journalism, publishing, education, scientific research and tourism" (Dong, 1996, p. 4). This long list of aims made it hard for the departments to decide what courses to offer to the students, and the students also found it difficult to have an overall knowledge about different fields of science and at the same time to become a proficient foreign language user. Several universities in China that are famous for sciences and engineering offer a degree in English for scientific uses, but they often change the name and purpose of the degree. The university that I graduated from, for example, has since then changed the major title to "English," deleting totally the word science, and now receives students from both sciences and arts background. When I entered the department, only science background students were considered.

Lost in College and City Life

My father accompanied me on my first trip to the university. I was excited, anxious, and nervous when our train entered the new city. I had never been to a city except Yichun in my life. Like Gatsby, I had frequently thrown myself into the dreams of a future life. Only I had been dreaming about my college life, "adding to it all the time, decking it out with every bright feather that drifted" (Fitzgerald, 1996, p. 88). No reality can match a long-cherished dream. I was immediately disappointed by the campus of the

university. I felt I was neglected and helpless as I stood in the middle of it, among all the students, parents, visitors, and teachers who were helping or trying to find their places. My father and I spent the first hours on campus looking for all the different temporary offices for various fees. The fees were numerous and soon after our arrival at the campus, my father and I found ourselves out of the money my mother had provided for my use for the whole term.

I entered the dormitory to which I had been assigned, and which I was to share with seven other new students, and I was immediately at a loss as to what I should and could do in it. I was nervous lest I did anything stupid or abnormal that my new roommates would look down upon and laugh at me. I had never lived outside home. I had never slept on a bed instead of a *kang*. I was the only one in the dorm who carried a big wooden box, and did not own a suitcase (I was happy they allowed me enough space for the wooden box). I soon realized that all my roommates were from cities. I was the only one from a little town and I looked awkward. Following traditions from her childhood, my mother insisted that I should not shave until married. This little moustache that was beginning to grow above my mouth and the museful impression that I carried, together with the combination of the formal and informal clothes that my mother prepared for me, none of which seemed to be suitable to wear at a university, made me look at least ten years older than I was.

On the first day I entered the dorm, I sat on one double-bed, wondering why I did not fit in. I nervously watched my roommates briskly busy with their washing and putting

things away. One of my roommates returned from the washroom and piece by piece hung up his washed underwear on a line that ran through the middle of the room. I marveled how at ease and at home he seemed. Another roommate made his bed in just seconds, and I thought I would never learn to do the same.

I was soon lost among my roommates' conversations about their lives in the cities as well, which I found very hard to join as I did not know anything about these topics. For the following four years, I would try to be one of them, and try to pretend that I had always been like what they were. Now when I look back, I think that probably that was when I began to lose myself once more. In an effort to hide the fact that I came from a small town, that I was from a poorer family, and that I did not have enough common sense knowledge and was not very worldly, I tried to survive by pretending to be like them. I accepted values and acted in ways that I did not necessarily agree with. However, I did not realize where my problem was until a dozen years later, indeed, it was until this time when I could sit down and quietly rethink about and relive in my past that I realized what I tried to take on.

One of my cousins was living in a nearby city that is two hours by train from our university. She was a "white collar" and I had only seen her in photos. My father insisted that I visit her during my first long weekend holidays. My father believed she would help me as my father had helped her when she was studying in a university. I took the trip, dressed up in the suit that my mother and sisters had made for me, which did not fit me and did not match my shoes, and which exaggerated my awkwardness. My cousin

received me with warmth but immediately advised me to change my clothes and not to wear the suit when she showed me around her city. While I was talking to her, I unconsciously said a local phrase which means "yeah" or "you are right." The pronunciation of the phrase is "en na" (嗯哪), which is commonly used in my hometown. My cousin's daughter heard my pronunciation and laughed. My cousin smiled to her and said, "Your uncle is from the mountains." My cousin then tuned to me and advised me not to say the phrase again. That is probably the first time I became conscious of my local dialect. When I returned to my campus, I began to be very careful in choosing my words in speaking. During one vacation back in my hometown, one of my old childhood friends commented on my conscious and slow speed talking style, "You sound like you've got some learned words." This comment made me self conscious again about my way of talking. In the university, I was laughed at because of my awkwardness and little town characters; in my home town, I looked and sounded pretentious which hurt my town folks. Where should I stand? How should I talk?

Back on campus I could not play that cool, remote role I lived in senior high school. I knew I was awkward. My clothes did not suit me and did not fit in with the rest of our college environment. My local dialect and accent also contributed to my awkwardness. I had a great deal to worry about and to learn. This did not just mean the courses. My lessons had to start from such basics as using the indoor bathroom and washing my own clothes. In spite of all this, I tried to be happy, or tried to appear so, to gain acceptance and to hide my self-pity.

I soon found out that in the university I did not have a chance to be a top student or, indeed, to be at the top or to be noticed (except for awkwardness) in anything at all. Although my English grammar was good enough for me to understand our textbooks, my English vocabulary was limited since I had learned only the words required for the college entrance exams. My receptive skills in English were very limited. I could understand our Chinese teachers when they spoke English, and I could understand our American teachers when they spoke to us slowly and used selected vocabulary, but I could not understand much of the American teachers when they spoke at a natural speed. One American teacher who worked as an engineer in America had a deep voice and, to me then, used undistinguished words in his talks. He always told stories in our class, and I was always in a nervous eagerness to catch his vivid stories lest I would miss another chance to join in my classmates' laughter at his humor. I was anxious to share the laughter and to know when to laugh in my class: I especially envied those who burst out laughing while the rest of us were silent, especially me, because we did not know what was going on.

I also found that some of my English pronunciations needed to improve. Our textbook carried the popular tongue twister which goes like this: "She sells seashells by the sea shore. The shells she sells are surely seashells. So if she sells shells on the seashore, I'm sure she sells seashore shells." I saw no new words in it and volunteered to read aloud to the class. I thought I had read it fluently. After I finished my reading I sat down confidently, waiting for nods and praises. I was surprised by the exploding laughter

from my classmates. I did not read it to be funny. I was a little shocked when I realized that I failed to distinguish the /s/ and /sh/ sounds and was caught by the twister. My fast speed of reading no doubt made it even more amusing to my classmates. The /s/ and /sh/ sounds were easy enough for me to differentiate, once I paid attention to them. However, the "th" sound alone took me years to master. Sometimes my tongue could not move quickly enough to form the sounds and remain intelligible and fluent. The prizes I won for Chinese and English speech competitions in my local schools seemed centuries away. I could only envy those classmates who could read and speak English fluently and beautifully. However, I never gave up my efforts to improve my English pronunciation. This ongoing process still continues.

I invested in two devices to help me learn English: a shortwave radio and a tape walkman. I used the radio to listen to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the Voice of America (VOA) programs, precious sources of authentic English. We could receive the VOA program signals at certain hours of the day, though the signals were not always clear. Today we have access to these programs through the Internet. Though we still can not visit its website directly from China, there are many English study websites that can transfer VOA programs. On the Internet, the signal is crystal clear, and besides, there are transcripts that we can consult when we have difficulty understanding certain parts of the programs. But in late 80s and early 90s, students on our campus did not have easy access to computers, and to me the Internet was still an unheard word. My tape walkman turned out to be too delicate for my English learning purpose: the machine was

small and did not have a rewind button which I frequently needed to re-listen to the parts that I did not understand. I had shared access to an old tape recorder in my class. However it was never idle; every hour somebody needed it. I was almost always too shy to use it.

Besides Chinese born teachers, we also had several American teachers. Overall I enjoyed and learned from their classes. I worked hard to gain special attention and appreciation from them. Deep inside, I still wanted the attention that I once had in my pre-university school life. However, probably because my ambition was misleading in the first place, I frequently felt I was not valued. Most of my efforts for recognition from American teachers were fruitless, as were my efforts to make myself visible in any other aspects of the foreign, wild, and exciting new world. Some small incidents with the American teachers also showed how my efforts were in conflict with the teachers' desires. In one American teacher's writing class, I wrote one of our assignments on a piece of paper that my second sister had given me. The paper was unique to me because I brought it from my hometown. I enjoyed writing on the paper because the paper was thin and I could write in a neat and clean manner. I gained straight As in my elementary school homework using similar paper. It was a little narrower than the common paper that could be bought on campus. I was very pleased with that assignment, and was anxious to see whether the teacher would give me positive comments on it during the next class. With this expectation in mind, I was rather taken aback when the teacher picked up my assignment with two fingers with the following comment: "You can buy a dozen pieces

of regular sized paper with only twenty cents, why would you use this kind of paper that can easily drop off from the pile?" He shared my homework with an exaggerated wave of the two fingers and the whole class laughed. I was embarrassed.

I figured that American teachers would encourage us to participate as much as possible in class and to be as creative as possible. In one class we were asked to continue a story we had read. My teacher's comment on my assignment was, "You are too creative." I was surprised that this had come from an American teacher. Apparently there was a limit also. Another time I was talking to an American teacher outside class and was trying to make a good impression on him by saying that I would like to participate more in his class. He said, "I would not like you to destroy other students' chances of participating." Incidents such as these puzzled me because it seemed to me that all of my efforts were in wrong directions. Back then I did not realize that part of my difficulties was I imagined a stereotyped "American" way of teaching and I assumed all my American teachers would teach in that imagined way (Wu, personal communication, Internet, October 8, 2005). Another part of the difficulties was probably because I need to learn to be an "average" student. Prior to university I had always been the top student, the center of my teachers' attention. Now in college life that was no longer possible. The attention of my classmates, especially the females, was not on me, either. In senior high school, though I tried not to be popular, my good grades were easy tools that drew admiring attention from my classmates, and I was happy about that, though I appeared to be cool. This time I really lost popularity and focus of attention. I tried to appear special

by playing the role of a funny, honest, helpful, morally correct, but less ambitious big brother; and by my "smart" remarks which made my classmates laugh. When I had my chance on the stage, I played funny tramps who made the audience roar. Now, as I read about identity, I realize that "identity relates to desire—the desire for recognition, the desire for affiliation, and the desire for security and safety" (Norton, 1997, p. 410). Though I gained some attention, I was being noticed in a way that did not fully satisfy me, and secretly and perhaps subconsciously I worked hard to fulfill my academic dream, which I knew I would only have a chance to realize in a far, far future.

In the city senior high school, I was different from my classmates because I was an outsider who earned good grades. I cherished that difference and tried my best not to share my stories with anyone lest the spell be broken and I would not be different anymore. I needed that difference to remind me of the pain and hurt I experienced so that I could keep working hard towards my goal, which I saw as the only way to regain dignity and to soften the hurt.

In the university I frequently felt I was an outsider too, who was awkward, but who did not earn exceptionally good grades anymore. My senior high school goal had been realized and in this new university life, I could not find further directions. I was not ready to face an independent life in the university and could not find help. My parents had finished their chapter of the "then he lived happily in the university and in his career life forever" fairy tale. I did not even have a close friend who could offer moral support. Like in my senior high school, I was different in the university setting. However, unlike

in my city senior high school, this time I hated the difference, and tried to minimize and hide it by pretending to be like the others and by exaggerating what I was not, for example, by making a fool of myself to make people laugh.

To cope with my new challenges in university life, I continued to keep writing diaries. Many of them were written in English, as I was also making efforts to improve my English writing skills.

Working as an English Teacher

Staring from my second year I took several part-time teaching jobs. I worked as a tutor to individual elementary and junior high school students in their homes, and later taught English to classes of elementary children. After my graduation I was hired by the same university as a full time English teacher.

I had a lot of worries and dreams about my future job long before my graduation day. Back then, any jobs in a joint-venture company, especially in those which did international trades, were considered adventurous and profitable, and therefore desired by new graduates. There was one such company in the city I came from. It was a furniture company co-founded by some Hong Kong investors but run by local people from the city. I was not quite willing to return to my home city to work, as it was in a rather remote area with few opportunities for sharing of the exciting development in the opening regions of China. However, I was ready to make some sacrifices if I could find a place for myself in that company. So I applied. I was given an informal interview during which I spoke

English to another Chinese man on the cell phone, who was working as an interpreter in that company. They seemed to be very happy about my qualifications and my English, and gave me a one-month trial term during my last winter vacation from the university. My job was to work in the factory with basic tasks of cutting wood into various boards for the furniture, as the company's personnel manager had warned me that if I wanted to work in their company, I would have to start from the basic working position. I met quite a few schoolmates from my city senior high school, some of whom had been working there soon after I went to university. Because they had worked there long enough, some of them were in supervisory positions. One of my old classmates in senior high school, who also shared the same desk with me, asked me how much money I was earning that month. He then told me with a triumphant air that he was earning three times more than I was. I did not enjoy working there. At the end of the month, I decided that the training I received from the university did not fit into this job. I also heard rumors that to work in an office in the company, one needed connections and I felt I would not have an easy chance of getting promoted to be an English interpreter. It was a bitter realization that even if I decided to sacrifice other possible chances to work in my home city, I might not be welcomed and needed there.

Most of my university classmates did not consider teaching to be an exciting and challenging job, and unlike Schecter (1997), I did not see teaching as my mission and dream. However, when the closing day of leaving the university came, teaching looked more realistic to me. In a teaching position I could at least use what I had learned, and it

was the job where I had some part-time experience. Teaching was also profitable enough to me, as I knew that once I became a full-time teacher, my part-time teaching salaries would also noticeably increase. Apparently I was not the only one who made big changes in making job decisions, as suddenly there were quite a few of my classmates who applied when our university posted the teaching job vacancies. I was relieved and happy when I was offered a position.

I enjoyed many of the classes I taught, especially my part-time children's classes, where I felt more confident than I did in the university classes. In front of children's trusting eyes, I was relaxed and at ease. I could stop worrying about myself and pay more attention to them. In children's classes I could fit better into the "good teacher" category because "good teachers care more about their students' learning than they do about their own teaching" (Harmer, 2000, p.3). But I struggled in most of the adult classes. In those classes I did not perceive myself as a qualified English teacher. I was not confident because I possessed only a bachelor's degree, because I could not express myself freely in English, and because I had never been to an English-speaking country. I lacked confidence because of my limited qualifications, inadequate target language proficiency, and the fact that I did not have first-hand experiences of living in an English-speaking country.

In my relationship with my adult students I often perceived myself as inferior to them in terms of common knowledge. I felt as if I was an older brother who was perceived as incompetent by his younger brothers who were too polite to point it out, or I

saw myself as an older brother who would soon be surpassed in knowledge and in strength by his younger brothers. As I lived my life within this metaphor (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980), I put on a happy and confident face as my cover story (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). I pretended that I was comfortable and secure.

I also taught some privately organized English classes, the students in which paid money to study English in their spare time. Sometimes teaching these private classes can be more demanding and challenging than teaching regular full-time student classes. In the regular university classes, students worry more about passing the exams than picking on the teachers. However in private classes, students pay much more money to learn English than those students in regular university classes. Therefore private class students are more selective about their teachers. My regular full time teaching job could not offer me enough money to support myself, so like many other young English teachers, I had to teach extra classes as a part time job. In some private classes, especially when I first began teaching, I felt I was constantly under unfriendly watching eyes. I was too self-conscious to focus on the students. One private night-class that I taught was an oral English class and the students were graduates from job training schools, colleges, or universities. These students wanted to refine their spoken English in their spare time for various reasons, such as finding a better job, preparing for their overseas studies, killing time, or just following a trend (talking about or actually taking actions to improve spoken English has become a popular trend in China).

I wanted to be creative in teaching that class. The students were eager to learn and willing to be cooperative. I tried to make my class interesting and encouraged my students to participate; however, I was uneasy and felt I was being ostentatious by trying to put on a show. I had good intentions, but I was not trained to teach in a creative way, and had no self-image of a competent non-native-English-speaking teacher. I had no role models to follow, and I was not particularly fluent as an English speaker. I wanted to be a better teacher, but I did not know how and I could not get help. I was under great pressure to prepare for that class and much of my time and effort was spent worrying and aimlessly thinking about how and what to teach in each class period. The students were accommodating and gave me mainly positive feedback on my efforts. However, they had little experience with being involved in active participation in class, and they might have had some uneasy feelings too. As I tried to shift my image of who I was as a teacher, I was also shifting who they were as students.

In another class, a regular university course offered to non-English majors, I went to the other extreme. I was among fifty or so teachers who were teaching the same course. More than twenty teachers met in our office each week to prepare our lessons together, and each time one teacher would provide examples of vocabulary use and suggestions for selection of language uses to be emphasized from the texts. We then set out to teach the same content to the students and were required to follow the same timeline. In that class I made limited personal contact with my students; I remained as businesslike and matter of fact as possible. I tried to adhere to our plans from our weekly preparation meetings. A

subconscious voice said, "If this is the way you want me to teach, if you treat me as a teaching machine, if you do not care and do not encourage any creativity and any extra efforts from me, then I will follow your instructions and be totally passive." That was part of my resistance to these requirements from the existing system. However, denying myself as an individual teacher and just living out my assigned role in the dominant narrative still made me feel uneasy. In this passive way, I was denying who I was, and my students also became victims.

In my other classes I varied from, on the one hand, trying to be creative and making my class interesting (and feeling under great stress and unease for my efforts) and, on the other hand, being passive and out of touch with the students. Neither way worked well for me.

I studied as a part-time student for my master degree in "linguistics and applied linguistics" from 1997 to 1999 in the same department where I taught. During those years I continued to teach both in the university and in private classes. My life then also involved taking care of my daughter who was born in 1997. After I received my master degree I still felt my teaching was a struggle. In the year 2001 I came to the University of Alberta to start this doctoral journey.

Stories of Returning to Teach

A big classroom

While composing field texts and the research text of my dissertation, I returned to teaching in China. I felt freshness in returning to a teacher's position. I was more confident now that I could speak English more fluently, that I had overseas experiences in studying and living and even in some research and teaching, and that I had "seen" or at least had a glimpse of a different educational and academic world. Having seen how professors enjoyed and conducted the courses I took in Canada, and having been shown care, encouragement, and appreciation from my professors, classmates and research friends, I was ready to show similar care, encouragement, and appreciation to my students. I felt happy about most of my classes and self rated them as preliminarily "successful." However there was one class in which I struggled and which could be rated as "failed." It was a huge class with more than 200 students in a stepped classroom. Most of those students came to this class for one purpose: to pass the entrance English exams for their graduate studies. When I began the class, I found myself standing in the spotlight facing what seemed to be a mountain of students. They sat loosely and comfortably in their chairs on these higher staged seats. I had to raise and tilt my head backward to see the majority of them. I introduced myself in English and the students listened attentively. However, as I continued to talk in English, I noticed from the looks on their face and their fidgeting on the seats that indicated that they were the bosses who

were not going to make extra effort to participate in the class or to understand my English. It seemed like they were an audience who paid to see a clown and had predetermined that they were not going to laugh. It felt so intensely that I was a teacher hired by the students. They paid money so that *I* could teach and perform and so that they could sit back and somehow, through sitting there, they should be able to pass the exam without any effort.

During a break in the first class, several students came to me to tell me they wanted me to quit speaking English in class. What they wanted was to pass the exam. However I did not like the idea of helping students to pass exams with "examination skills" and I was not good at it. I struggled and suffered in the class three times, wondering whether I should quit. When there came a sign that some students were also suggesting the same idea I quit and was greatly relieved.

However, this little failure has been living with me. Apparently what I learned did not help me to be a better teacher according to these students. Even though I am more competent in English, I have been exposed to some experiences of living in an English speaking country, and I am more willing to show care and concern to my students, this is not what the students wanted. I changed but my students' expectations stayed the same (Blair, personal communication, Edmonton, October 20, 2005). They might argue that if I cared about them, I should know that what they wanted was to pass English exams, not to improve their English more generally, at least not until afterwards. But this is where I cannot compromise. I cannot teach English in a class that does not encourage the use of

English. I later found out that those private class students were not the only ones who did not really like my way of teaching.

In my regular university teaching I found myself under uncomfortable frames that were shaping me in a way I did not want. First of all, I felt was not trusted by my superiors as a competent teacher. Experts were arranged to sit in my classes and watch what I did. I was not alone in receiving this extra supervision. In fact experts, who were retired or close-to-retirement age English teachers, were enlisted to sit in any non-expert teacher's class at any time that was convenient to the experts without any necessary beforehand notice to the non-expert teachers. During our regular office meeting the names were called out of those whom the experts had found faults in their teaching. They commented on teachers' teaching methods and students' involvement. They also commented on things like untidy blackboard writing, unsuitable clothes worn by teachers, and teachers not following closely enough the timelines assigned to them. These were all good reasons for the teachers to be scolded and warned. Each teacher was also given an outline of the requirements for being a good teacher. It included things like coming to and leaving class on time, dressing properly, and following closely to the timelines. The outline also stressed the number of articles teachers should publish each year. After reading the outline, I was very uncomfortable. After thinking about what was worrying me, I found that in the two page outline, there was not a word for caring about students. According to this outline, the best teachers are still teaching *machines*. After all, machines are much better in following orders. They never dress in the wrong way if

properly programmed and machines can never be late. It was as thought we need to change ourselves into machines in order to be good teachers. For me a good teacher means one who cares about her/his students and is one who connects and communicates with students. When too much attention is given to details like dress, punctuality and timelines, the main point might be missing. Overstressing the importance of those minor details might discourage, or even put to punishment, the teachers who are caring for their students.

Staff meeting

I worked in different offices in our department. The atmosphere in each office meeting was different. Some are more relaxed: others are more solemn where only the director speaks. During one such solemn staff meeting, the director had finished giving orders and we were about to mark the standard test papers. There were about twenty teachers in a big room, and nobody made a sound. I felt the atmosphere was stuffing. I wanted to make it a little more alive. I turned on some music in one computer. Several teachers smiled at me, and small talks emerged in the room. I thought it worked to relax people. The music and small talking did not interfere with our marking of the standard tests. I thought they made the work more enjoyable. This lasted only about five minutes until the director spoke, without lifting her head and said, "Cui, turn off the music." I turned it off and the room was silent again.

In another staff meeting, I was troubled by the way teachers' names were called either to be praised or criticized. I shared this concern after the meeting with a superior but was told "it is the only way to manage the teachers." Now in staff meetings I keep my silence. I look down at the space in front of me to avoid making eye contact with my colleagues. I do not want to make eye contact because I know if I do I would make friendly smiles. However, I am afraid my smiles could be interpreted as a conspiracy, and disrespectful to my director. I adjusted my personal style and kept silent in staff meetings where my director speaks.

My preference for these staff meetings would be like the Research Issues Table at the University of Alberta where teachers feel free to share their teaching stories, their experiences and concerns of curriculum making. My idea of the staff meeting is in sharp contrast to the reality of staff meetings in the English teaching landscape where I teach.

Presentation

A group of teachers, including me, were invited by another teacher who had connections with a publishing house, to write a teachers' reference book. We met a few times, discussing what the book should look like. One colleague and I were very eager to use this opportunity to make the teachers' reference book a sharing and discussing platform rather than a "traditional" step by step instruction book. Some of my colleagues argued that a teachers' reference book should look like a teachers' reference book and should include detailed steps of teaching. We could not all agree so we decided to write

two different sample units and to send them to the publisher. While we were waiting for reply, we were invited to another university to share how we planed to write the reference book.

There were about twenty English teachers gathered in the meeting hall. Their directors spoke and then introduced our group. I was the first to speak. As I had agreed, I spoke in English. After a few words, I knew something was wrong. The teachers, except the few in the first row, were sitting back in their comfortable sofas and ready to fall asleep. I managed to finish my talk and there were no questions for me. I realized I had become one of the boring speakers who dominated meetings. As I learnt later from a teacher, they were forced to come, and they were not interested in whatever I was about to say. What they were concerned at that time was to get a good rest so they could go and teach in their next classes. Their directors made this arrangement for us to come and share. The teachers played their audience role passively. I felt bad that I had played the part when it did not seem as though I was welcome.

The above experiences make me continue to think about my role as a teacher in the educational landscape in China. China's educational landscape is shifting. As a participant in the parade (Geertz, 1995), my position in the landscape is also shifting. When the direction in which I prefer to go and the direction the educational system is going are not the same, bumping stories occur. Clandinin and Connelly (1998) believe that such bumping stories offer opportunities for policy makers to recheck and even change the educational directions. (Clandinin & Huber, 2005, p. 49) However, first they

need to listen to these stories and to treat these stories not as disturbing annoyances but as valuable opportunities to change for the better. As Clandinin and Huber (2005) summarized how Clandinin and Connelly (1998) described an educational reform:

> They describe reform as best accomplished by walking along with participants, trying to hear their stories, trying to tell our [teachers'] own stories, and then trying, with them, to understand the interconnected web of stories, and, in so doing, to gain some sense of the interwoven narratives."(p.49)

Hopefully our stories can be heard, discussed, and can contribute to the course of our reforming educational landscape in China.

Expert in my classroom

When I entered my class, a student of mine approached me and warned me in a whisper: "We have visitors today." I smiled to him and said, "Yes, and that's all right." And then I smiled to my class and to my visitors. I knew the faces of all the four teachers who were sitting in the back of my class, and I knew two of them by name. One was an officially designated "expert teacher", and the other three were non-expert teachers. They were all from Office Number One in our department. The university designated four or five teachers as "experts" in our department. Two of them are retired professors, and the others were close-to-retire teachers or directors in different offices. There were three offices for teachers who taught English to non-English majors in the university. Office Number One and Office Number Two taught regular English classes; while Office Number Three taught "advanced" English classes. Students who sat in the advanced

English classes earned high grades in the English placement exams. I was working in Office Number Three in that term. I knew that the director of Office Number One asked every teacher in her office to sit in at least two classes taught by different teachers in our department to "learn from each other". I also knew that the expert teacher was asked by either our department or our university to sit in non-expert teachers' classes to evaluate the teachers. The expert teacher had been kind enough to give me a notice of her coming five minutes ago. But I did not know I was to receive four teachers, and I did not know whether the expert teacher came as an "expert teacher" to evaluate me or as a "non-expert" teacher to "learn from each other". In any case I thought I would invite the expert and non-expert teachers to introduce themselves to my students and then later to ask them whether they would like to participate in my class activities.

This was the plan I made weeks ago when I heard expert teachers could drop in our classes. A colleague warned me I could make the experts angry if I asked them to introduce themselves. They could interpret it as a challenge to their authority. But I could not bear the thought of having "strangers" in my class. It was unfair to my students. To play fair, I also "warned" the expert teacher that I might ask her to introduce herself to my class five minutes ago when she told me she would drop in my class.

I greeted my students and then commented that we had respectful visiting teachers in our class. I then said to the four teachers with a nice smile, "Would you like to introduce yourselves to my students?" The expert teacher introduced herself in English. Then the second teacher said his name. The third teacher said both her and the fourth

teacher's names. The fourth teacher kept silent and looked a bit annoyed that she was asked to introduce herself. My students smiled at them and said hellos.

Usually at the beginning of my class a student gave us an informal report on latest news, her/his special interests, or his/her experiences. Then I would encourage and sustain a short discussion around the report. My students were eager to join the discussions now since they realized their voices were valued and that there were no "fixed" answers among our talks. After this I sometimes divided my students into groups of three or four to read and discuss the English texts in our textbook. My students loved this activity and there was always laughter and smiles when they had small group activities. In the later part I usually asked each group to share some key points within the whole class.

I never used the teaching plans we group-prepared, but I always carried them with me because I was warned that visiting expert teachers might ask for them. If I was caught not carrying the teaching plans with me I could be punished. I tried to follow the timeline of which texts in our textbook I should teach for each class, but I did not cover all the details of the grammar and new word explanations in the teaching plans. I tired to use the new words in my talk in the class and I preferred to explain the words spontaneously rather than reading out from printed pages. I wish my students could have more chances of hearing the words, reading them, and using them in contexts rather than memorizing their dictionary definitions. I felt lucky that I was assigned to teach one of the "advanced English classes". Students in advanced English classes could pass the National Band Four

English exams with ease, so I did not feel compelled to cover the grammar and structure rules. We could, instead, spend more time on real communications in English in our class. However, by not following the teaching plans closely, I was running a risk. The student's report and the discussions were not listed in the teaching plans. I was ready to give reasons for my way of teaching when asked. I just wished I would be given a chance to justify my way of teaching and not be punished without being spoken to. However, if they wanted to punish me for following my own way of teaching, I was ready to take the punishment.

At that particular day, my students' report was about a story of a factory and its environmental impact. The discussion on it went very well. I was happy that the topic was related to the theme of the text we were to read in our textbook for that day, so I had a better excuse to allow our discussions to run a little longer. Afterwards because of the time limit I decided to have the whole class of twenty eight students as one big group to read and discuss the text in our textbook. The four teachers did not join our previous discussions on the morning report, so I invited them to read part of the texts we were learning. Three of them, except the one who did not introduce herself, took my invitation. When I ended my class and thanked the four teachers, they left without any comments on my teaching.

At the end of the term I received an overall "A plus" from my students' evaluation for my teaching, and my name was printed in the praised teachers' list from the university. When I checked the detailed evaluations to me on the Internet, I saw most of my students

gave our English class positive comments of encouraging their thinking and improving their conversational English skills. There were also a few suggestions for more grammar knowledge. I also saw the evaluation to me from experts, so the expert who sat in my class was there as an "expert" after all (that was the only occasion I had visitors in my class in that term). She commented that overall I taught in a traditional way, that my English and computer kills were high as I could spontaneously type words onto the screen of the computer, but that the typing wasted time as compared to having everything prepared beforehand.

In reflection, I feel happy that I ran the risk to teach my students in a way I believe beneficial for their learning and growing. I know believe that learning English involves interaction and communication. I also believe that English class should not be a place only for learning the knowledge about English, but should be a place to encourage thinking and exploring different perspectives. After all, education should mean that the "person being educated is moved from a less to a more desirable state of mind, that he or she gains larger, more coherent perspective on his or her inhabited world" (Greene, 1978, p. 92).

In my own journey of learning English, I memorized a lot of texts and grammar rules, but it was through making use of English as a tool to gain information and perspectives, through extensive reading and listening to "real" everyday English, through using English to express myself and to communicate with people, that I gradually began to improve my English using skills. For the students in the university, they have learned

English for at least six years in high schools. In those six years they have learnt enough English grammar rules and structures. I feel it is high time that in the university they be given some opportunities to use English as a tool for communication.

Through my English class, I want my students to be encouraged to use English, to think, to discuss and to share what they are reading, listening to and thinking. I do not want my students to be limited to the study of grammar rules, word definitions, and sentence structures in the textbooks. I do not care whether my teaching was named "traditional", "modern", or any other methods as long as my students are encouraged to communicate in English, and as long as they are encouraged to be exposed to more resources in English, and as long as they are thinking and sharing their thoughts opinions. The methods are means, not ends. When real learning is taking place I believe I am using "the right" methods.

CHAPTER FIVE:

NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF HUAI AS A STUDENT AND ENGLISH TEACHER

Coming to Huai's Narratives

When I was writing my proposal for this study, I wished Huai would be a participant. Huai is a few years younger than I. Like me, she also came from Yichun, the mountain city, though her home town is a few hours' by train from mine. She graduated from the same Department of Foreign Languages in the same university as an English major as me and was invited to be a teacher in our department after her graduation. Huai is easy going and nice to talk to. She is an English teacher liked by her students and her colleagues. When I came back to do my research, I contacted her with eagerness and a little worry. Would we be comfortable talking to each other as we enjoyed a few years before my study trip? Would she be willing to join my study and to share her personal stories, when this kind of educational research is still rare in our teaching landscape? I was greatly relieved when she recognized my voice. With a nice manner she said she would be happy to join my study. Besides joy I also felt gratitude, knowing I could offer her very little except to be a listener, which she might not necessarily need at that moment. For me as a narrative researcher, I feel I am growing because of my own stories when I share them. But when Huai agreed to join my study, she probably did not have any experience with narrative research, and I know it was more out of support for a friend and a colleague that she gracefully agreed to join and to share her personal past. Our

conversation began in a teacher's resting room in our teaching building, which was quiet when no teachers were having office hours there. There Huai began sharing her life stories weaving in her schooling and teaching trails.

This sharing experience further encourages me to use narrative inquiry as a way to understand ourselves and people around us. Even though we thought we knew ourselves and people around us, we are most likely to be surprised when we listen to their stories, especially when they are open with us, and when we go to the parts that we have not visited before.

Huai's Living Space and Schooling

I was born in a small forest center called Dongfeng (东风), which was part of a town called Langxiang (郎乡), which in turn is one of the 20ish towns of Yichun (伊春) city. When the major part of the trees in our center were cut down, which happened when I finished my second year in my elementary school, all the workers and their families moved to other small forestry centers and eventually to the Langxiang town center itself, so there are no inhabitants now in my birth place.

I have a few key memories of my home. There were two sleeping rooms, one with a kang and the other with a wooden bed. I remember that my home was spacious and the big kang was comfortable. There was a big wooden cabinet in my home and I used to go for the powdered milk in it when Mom was not around.

My earliest life adventures went within a few hundred yards from my home. There were train tracks in front of our house for the trains to carry logs out of the forestry center. Those trains were smaller in size to the ones we see today in China. The small trains also took my father to and from work. My father usually started his workday as early as four or five o'clock in the morning and came back home at about six or seven in the evening, so I scarcely got a chance to see him then.

There was a school in my forestry center and my mother worked in it as the bell woman. However, there was actually no bell in the school, so strictly speaking my mother was the "stickwoman" as she beat a stick against a length of rail track instead of shaking a bell when it was time to start or finish a class.

Because there were no kindergartens, my three-year-older sister and I often accompanied our mother to the school. Other times my mother left me in another worker's home to be babysat.

I became a first grader when I was five and a half years old. I was actually an auditor because I was under the official age of entering school. I was allowed to sit in the class because my mother was a working staff in the school. My mother preferred to put me in a classroom so she did not have to worry about me when she was working. Besides, she already told me how to read, so she thought I could follow well in a first grade class. My seat was in the last row of the classroom in accordance with my "auditing" title, and I had to squat on the stool in order to reach the desk.

I cannot remember much about how many students or classrooms the school had or what was taught in school, probably because I had learned at home everything to be taught in first grade. However I do remember how I was always being bullied by the older students. I also remember the students in my class fought with the students in the other class. I was physically smaller, so most times I just stood aside watching.

The school had a small yard and a wooden gate, which was never closed and was always open to every one. Winter was cold in our area. A stove in the classroom was the heating system, which warmed a big brick wall in the room. Sometimes when the room was filled with too much smoke from the stove, the students would have one day off from school.

When I was about to go to Grade Three, all the workers in the forestry center moved on to another and bigger forest center. My birth place hence was unoccupied, but certain parts of my life in the birth place still frequently go to my dreams today.

Huai's dreams about her birth place remind me so much of my own dreams about my first home, and about my senior high school lives.

This second forest center that my family moved to, Xindong (新东) Forestry Center, was much bigger than the one we moved out of. I still have relatives living in Xindong today, which gives me a good reason to revisit that beautiful place.

For my school work, I did pretty well in grade one of my first school as I said I had learned at home what was to be taught in school. But in grade two, I began to lose track. When we moved into the new forest center, all the students of different ages and

grades were being taught in one big classroom by one teacher, while we were waiting for a new school to be built. Here in this big confusing classroom I was further lost. When we moved into the new classroom after the new school was finished, I had already lost my interest in school. I neglected my homework and fell far behind my classmates. Because my mother continued her bell work in the new school, my teachers gave me an easy time though I was doing very poorly in my studies.

My mother, besides going to work, had to cook for the family and had to get up early enough to prepare breakfast for my father each morning. She could not always find time to help me and my sister with our school work.

I felt bad about myself then because of my bad grades in school. I wanted to play with the girls who were earning good grades, but I was frequently rejected by them as a "poor-grade" girl. Being rejected by the "good-grade" group, I had to go for the "bad-girl" group. But somehow I found I did not belong to the "bad-girl" group either, and was rejected again. I became lonely and I longed to be accepted by the "good-grades" girls. At that time, I also fell in love with a cute boy in my elder sister's class, but I knew I did not deserve him unless I could improve my grades.

I decided to change. In order to have a chance to become a good grade student, I repeated my first year in Junior High school. Probably because my attitude changed or probably because it was the second time for me to read the same textbooks, I suddenly found that I could understand both the textbooks and the teachers very well. Those things were not difficult; I just never gave them serious attention before. I began to earn good

grades. I received 100 percent for math and English and near 100 percent for Chinese. Those are the three major subjects for junior high schools. I also worked hard for the minor subjects like "Vegetables and Plants" and obtained good results in exams. I felt very satisfied with my efforts and achievements.

In my repeated first year in Junior High, I had some good teachers. They were good teachers because, I now think, they either graduated from teachers' college, or maybe they were senior high graduates who almost made their way to a university. A lot of older teachers did not receive much formal education. At that time, college graduates and even senior high school graduates were very qualified teachers who were rare to find in remote schools. Although all the teachers took their jobs seriously, I enjoyed the young teachers who were obviously better qualified for their jobs.

In the forestry center, nobody spoke English except the English teachers. I felt then that my English teacher's teaching was perfect. This was the second time for me to take the same English class since, as I said, I was repeating my first year courses, but I felt everything I was learning from that English class was brand new. After my (repeated) first English class, I went home excited and told my mother eagerly what I had just learned in the English class. Though my mother was too busy doing housework to pay due attention to my talking, each day I kept reporting to her about my process in the English class. A few weeks later, I began to write diaries with the few English words I learned: father, mother, sister and family. This is the first time I ever wrote diaries in any

language. I kept writing my English diaries, which might have helped me earn the perfect grades for my English class.

It is an amazing surprise for me to learn Huai's story of repeating her first year courses in her junior high school as a successful effort to regain the academic achievements that she missed. This reminds me so much of my own experience of repeating my school year in my senior high school when I decided to prove myself in test grades. We both seemed to notice that we could actually achieve a great deal once we really set our minds on the textbooks and were ready to play the part of following the rules, though we both failed to do so at first when we were neglecting our school work.

My family was living in Xindong Forest Centre. Early each morning my father had to travel long distances to another forest center to work. When I was in Grade Two in junior high school, one of my relatives who lived in Langxiang (郎乡), the center of the town, invited my family to live in her old house in the town. For my father, the distance to work from the Xindong Forest Center and from the Langxiang town was not much different. However, it was much more convenient to live in the town for the rest of the family than in the forest center, so my family accepted the invitation, and I was transferred to the junior high school with the best academic reputations in the town.

One of my father's old teachers was working as the vice principal in the good-reputed junior high school in the town, so I was able to enter it through her recommendation. The vice principal, my father's old teacher and friend, managed to find

a small desk for me in the classroom, which had already been packed with students and where every available seat had already been taken.

Huai's separate desk reminds me so clearly of my own special desk. The pattern I found in our stories came as amazing surprises. When Huai was sharing this part of her experiences, there was so much resonance in me. I thought I knew Huai, but I would never come to know this part of her, or most part of her early experiences, if I did not come to this narrative study.

In the new school, I continued to enjoy my English class. I found my new English teacher was in many ways like my favorite one in the other school. They even looked like each other. My two English teachers spoke English in very similar ways, and indeed, thanks to their wonderful role models, I found I did not have to change much of my English pronunciation after I majored in English in the university.

Except for enjoying my English class, however, I experienced a hard transition from a local village-like school to a much more formal and high-reputed junior high school. I was stressed and I felt I was falling behind my classmates. However, I did not lose heart, but turned my pressure into motivation for working hard. My efforts paid off, and despite my feeling that I was falling behind, I did very well in my first exams and my good grades ranked in the top five in my class.

Like schools, students were also ranked in China's schools according to their grades in the middle and final exams of each term. After each exam, students' grades and ranks were announced and publicized. Currently high school students are still ranked

after each exam. In elementary schools children are receiving As, Bs, Cs and Ds for their exams and are not officially ranked. However, at parents' meetings teachers tend to tell parents how many students in their classes received As and Bs and so on, so parents can still sense what position their children are in their classes.

Despite my good grades, however, I did not feel I was being accepted and liked by my master teacher, which I think is because I was from a small forest center and because my parents were not in high and powerful positions. However, I again managed to turn what I observed as a hostile welcome into motivation for working hard.

Her motivation to prove for herself and for her family also reminds me of my determination to prove myself and my family when I moved to the city senior high through my father's begging.

Huai worked hard through the rest of her one and a half junior high years, and she kept her grades within the top three of the near 300 students. With her good grades in the entrance exams for senior high, Huai entered a key municipal senior high school located in Nancha (南岔), a major town, and a railway center, of Yichun city. From there, it would be natural for her to make her way to a good university.

But competition in the key senior high school was tough. Huai felt surrounded by distinguished peers, but she was once again motivated to keep up with the new pace. And once more her efforts earned her good grades in the exams and she was still in the top three in her class. However, Huai never felt secure even with those good grades. Her sense of insecurity kept her working hard.

Huai's sense of insecurity also reminds me of my own constant fear for the future in my city senior high school life. I was also earning good grades then. I knew then that my future did not depend on what grades I was earning in the process of senior high school, but only on my results in the National Entrance Exams for Universities and Colleges. The process and experiences are worth nothing. One result at the end of our eleven years of schooling has the only final say.

When Huai started her third and final year in her senior high school, all the students in her grade (in six classes) were ranked according to their grades. Huai was able to work into top ten, which earned her qualifications to be recommended by the school to a top university without taking the National Entrance Exams. Only those schools with municipal key or higher ranks enjoy the right to recommend students. The city senior high school I graduated from does not have this advantage.

Huai was strongly recommended by her senior high teachers, interviewed by two professors from one of the best universities in China, and was accepted. Huai was given a choice between two majors from the university: one was English for Science and Technology, and the other was International Trade. Huai did not know which one to choose. One of her teachers from senior high thought English would be good for a girl to build a career on. Huai listened to the teacher and decided to major in English. This happened half a year before the National Entrance Exams that Huai otherwise would have to take. Huai witnessed her classmates strive for the entrance exams while she enjoyed her last months of senior high with a comparatively easy air.

Huai's lack of knowledge about departments and majors in universities also make me remember my own lack of information. We both talked and listened to people around us: teachers, classmates, and family members. With luck, we could major in something that we would later on enjoy and excel in. My feeling is that this is still the same situation that a lot of senior high school graduates are facing today. They most likely focus much more on earning good grades in the university entrance exams than thinking about which major or career suits them better.

Huai's Undergraduate Life

Huai entered the Department of Foreign Languages in the university in 1995, six years after me, and majored in English for Science and Technology. In many ways Huai adapted to the university life better than I did. Huai came to the university with a good attitude. "I am a girl from a little town, and everything in the university looked good to me, and I was so eager to learn everything," she said. She was very satisfied with the university. This was a little different from my experience. When I arrived at the university six years before Huai, I was disappointed. My entrance grade was forty points higher than the lowest requirement of the university, and I felt I should have applied for an even better university in Beijing. The campus of the university then was not as beautiful as I hoped for.

When Huai arrived, the campus had improved a lot from when I first came in. The old and dirty residential houses in the center of the campus were rebuilt into a big library.

The old and shabby dining halls were replaced by new and better equipped dining buildings. The dormitories were also under better management.

Huai came from a key senior high school, where she had highly competitive classmates and well qualified teachers. Huai was used to competing with excellent peers, living in the school dormitory, and sharing a room with seven other roommates. These made for a relatively easy transition for her.

However, also like me, Huai met great difficulties understanding oral English when she entered the university. Like me, Huai never used a tape or any other learning facilities to learn English, nor did she ever hear English from any other sources except in her English classes before she entered university. Again, Huai was highly motivated to work hard when facing difficulties, and her grades always ranked top ten in the forty English major students who entered the university that year.

At the end of her first year study in the university, all the top ten students were eligible to compete for the three quotas to study in an American senior high school for a year as an exchange student. However, for their trip abroad they were required to pay the department a large sum of guarantee money, which was not to be returned to them if they did not return to their university in China after one year's study in America. They were also required to sign a contract with the department to work as an English teacher in this department for five years after graduation, which if they failed to fulfill, their guarantee money would not to be returned to them. Some of those ten qualified students did not want to be a teacher or to lose money; some could not pay the guarantee deposit in the

first place. In the end, Huai obtained the chance, borrowed money from relatives, and went to America as an exchange student for a year. "This experience in America saw the biggest change in me for my university life," she said. This trip greatly improved her English and foreshadowed that teaching English would be her future career.

Huai in America

I felt lucky that I could have the chance to study abroad and I was eager to learn everything. We three (me and my two girl classmates in China) were to study for three terms in a private senior high school near Boston in America.

In my English course in the American school all the fifteen students in the class were international exchange students. They were from Germany, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Italian, Kenya, and Hong Kong. We three were the only ones from Mainland China. The teacher spoke to us with a slow speed and clear voice, knowing all the students were using English as a foreign language. She assigned us to read English short stories, each of which was about twenty pages long. We three were overwhelmed by the assignments and could not understand much of the stories after we managed to read to the final pages. The main difficulty was there were too many new words for us. We spent most of our previewing time looking up the new words in our concise English-Chinese dictionaries, which we took with us to America, but in these small dictionaries many of the words in our novels we could not find. We then tried to learn from our teacher's explanation and from our classmates' discussions in class. We three did not speak much in class. I felt the

students from other countries were better English users than we three Chinese students. They also had broader scope of background knowledge. We three tried to check on each other about our understandings of the stories after class, each one sharing her best guesses. However, we mostly still felt unsure if our best guesses were correct.

We also found that we had a lot of problems with our English grammars. Our teacher in that class made careful comments and corrections for our writings. These comments and corrections greatly helped us to pay closer attention to and to improve our English grammars.

This initially was a surprise to me. Frequently I hear Chinese students complain that they could not orally communicate in English, and often they say they are quite confident in writing in good English grammars. Similarly, in my early university years, I worried a lot about speaking and understanding spoken English and was relatively more satisfied with my English grammar knowledge and English essay writing. Therefore when I first heard Huai talking about her dissatisfaction about her English writing and English grammars, I was a little surprised.

This little dissimilarity in our feelings about our English grammar led me into a further conversation with Huai, and my first question to her was whether she ever memorized any English texts like I did. Huai's answer to that question was short and clear: she never did. She then added that she never read any reference books either. The way she learned English in her junior and senior high schools was to follow her English teachers' explanations very attentively and to take careful notes. She then frequently

reviewed her class notes. She said this studying method had earned her the top-ten position in all her pre-university English tests. As I have mentioned in my own narrative accounts, my major way of studying English in senior high school was to memorize all the texts in my English textbooks. I was wondering whether our different ways of learning English are in any ways linked to our initial different feelings towards our English grammar.

However, in discussing this issue with my supervisor, Dr. Wu, I realized there might be some other reasons for Huai and I to have different feelings towards our grammar knowledge. As Dr Wu commented, "Huai's comments on grammar and your feelings of grammar may be not comparable. She was in the United States and the teacher could have treated her writing with much higher standards. The correction of her grammar could be those indescribable rules such as idiomatic usage of words, expressions and sentence structures" (personal communication, Internet, October 8, 2005). Interestingly in the process of writing the final drafts of this dissertation, especially with the editing suggestions from my supervisory committee, my feelings about my own English grammars and writing had a shift as I began to see that I have quite some problems in these areas. Maybe as Cummins (2001) suggested, the oral communication difficulties were easier to overcome, though they might appear as initial obstacles, while in the long run it is the written skills that determine whether a second-language learner reaches a high competence level.

The second course we took for our first term in America was Biology. We chose this course because we had learned it in senior high school in China, so we thought we would have an easier time. However, in this course we struggled to follow the teacher, who, unlike our English course instructor, spoke rather fast. The third course we chose was Spanish and we enjoyed it! We enjoyed that class because all the students in that class were learning it from the beginning and we three were not falling behind.

I suffered most in my Public Speaking course, which my two Chinese classmates did not take. First of all I could not follow the teacher and did not understand much of what was going on in class. And I suffered to speak in front of my classmates with broken English that I felt my classmates and teacher did not understand much. I was very frustrated. I felt I was losing face as a Chinese student when I stood there not able to speak in good English. I felt like I was going to hell each time I was about to enter that classroom. My teacher in that class noticed my great difficulties and assigned an American partner to me. We did pair work, but mostly I got help from my partner. After I managed to write out my speech, my partner and I would go to a quiet place, where I would rehearse my talking while my partner gave me supportative feedback. Gradually I found I was making progress in this course.

I did not feel accomplished much in the first term, but I found what I learned and experienced in my first term, especially in my Public Speaking course, helped me to meet the second term comparatively more easily. In my second term, I began to understand my teachers and classmates better and was able to participate in some class discussions.

In between the first and second term I enjoyed a school vacation, staying in an American home. My hostess was a mother whose child was studying in the same senior high school where I was an exchange student. I was living in the family free of charge. I improved my everyday English and broadened my cultural background knowledge living with the family. These experiences of living in an American family also helped me in my second term.

In my second term English class, we were asked to read novels and to write reflective papers. My first paper was a nightmare, but with the teacher's help, my writing began to improve. The only course in which I did not see improvement was American History. The lack of context of the course content to my life experiences made it extremely hard for me to understand or to remember the main points in the textbook.

In my third term, we international exchange students began to take courses together with native American students. By the third term, I had gained a lot of confidence and had begun to enjoy the new challenges in my classes.

Huai Became a Teacher

When Huai returned to the university in China after one year's study in America, "from the ideal back to reality," in her own words, she was not comfortable in most classes. The courses she enjoyed most after coming back were those taught by teachers from America. By then she could understand the American teachers very well and she found it easier to write the assignments for those courses. Huai did not enjoy the

"foreign" teachers' classes before she went to America, mainly because she could not understand them then. But after she returned there was a big shift.

Huai found her classmates had clearer defined groups and circles after she returned from America. She also found her classmates, especially within their circles, enjoyed closer relationship than before she left, owing to two years of studying and living together, and the one month military training experience, which Huai missed thanks to her overseas trip. She made friends with a group that she liked. When some of the group members began to joke on her weight and her resemblance to Indians, she knew she was accepted and was "in" the group. Huai enjoyed the close relationship with her classmates, especially with her "circle friends," which she did not have before she left for America.

Though Huai signed the contract with the department to teach English after her graduation, her dreams and ambitions were to work as an interpreter or a translator in a big company. I remember I had similar dreams, and most of my classmates had similar dreams. I did not want to be a teacher while I was studying in the university because a teacher's job was known, and therefore less exciting, to me. To work in a company as a translator or an interpreter, however, was an unknown job, and therefore was more attractive to me, and likewise to Huai, who were ambitious, young, adventurous and risk taking. "I just wanted to work in a big and fine company and do something great," said Huai.

When facing graduation in her fourth year in the university, however, Huai witnessed how hard it was for her classmates to find a decent job. Huai was happy she

had a good teaching job waiting for her, and that she could ask back the guarantee money that she borrowed from relatives and which she paid to the department before her American trip.

I remember I chose to teach in the university for the same reason that it was the best choice for me when facing graduation. Teaching, though not romantic, is a decent and respectable job, and promises fairly good money through teaching extra English classes. Some of my university classmates came back to teach after their adventures ended in some companies.

When Huai graduated and became an English teacher in the university, she found she had a lot of chances to teach English in her part-time. Like me, Huai also worked as a part-time tutor before she graduated. Similarly, Huai found that after graduation she could earn much more money working for the same length of time teaching English than before she graduated. "It is such a good feeling to be able to earn money. I decided then that when I earned and saved enough money, I would surely go and live abroad."

However, Huai soon found that the money she earned disappeared very fast. This reminds me so strongly of the same realization. I felt I was rich the first two years after my graduation, until little by little, with marriage, child raising, and other spending catching up, I have to work hard to make ends meet.

Gradually Huai began to enjoy teaching and to work in the department. She enjoyed being liked by colleagues and students. She felt satisfaction from her work and

her relationships with her fellow teachers and her students. Gradually, her dream of living abroad left her. She was settling down comfortably at her job and life.

Huai felt very good about her teaching until she started her graduate courses. When first joined this study, she was studying for a master degree in English literature in the English Department where she was a teacher. "When I started my master program, I then suddenly felt I did not know anything. I did not know how to teach," she said. Also like me, Huai worked through her master's courses in her spare time while still teaching. When Huai was having the first two conversations with me for this study, she was in the process of writing her Master degree thesis. I can feel that like always in her past schooling experiences, she is learning in her master's program.

When I passed through the hall of our department, I saw Huai's photo posted among a few other teachers who won the best teaching awards from the university. Another side story about Huai was when the director in our office asked us to sit in the classes taught by the teachers from another office to "observe and learn from them," someone immediately suggested we all sit in Huai's class. As I said in the prelude to Huai's story, she is liked by her students and by her colleagues. However, further narratives into Huai's thoughts would find that Huai has more to say …

Huai as a Teacher

When I first became an English teacher I was excited. I was eager to speak English to my students and I was confident that my English was good enough to make me

a good teacher. However I soon found that my own "high level" of English did not guarantee me as a good teacher as I needed to relate to my students, and this became very hard when they did not understand much of my English! To make myself understood in English, I had to paraphrase myself, which was also fun, except it took up too much of my class time, and that was not good when I was asked to finish certain number of pages of textbooks for each single class!

All the teachers in our office, which are up to three dozen, would sit together and "group prepare" for the texts we are going to teach. I think most of us realize that this is a routine that we have to go through. I personally never found our group prepared materials useful in my class. Those materials are usually usages of lists of words, detailed grammar and structure explanations of the texts, and a detailed time-plan. The only usage of those materials is for the experts to check so that we who are under observation could escape the blame that we are not following the official orders from above. However, this time plan is a serious matter and if we were caught not closely teaching by it punishment can be severe. This time plan is one frame that is binding us teachers from any individual originality in designing our own teaching plans. Some teachers may still want to try something away from the time-plan, but for me, I want to play safe, and I never want to be a trouble maker, so I follow the time-plan very closely. But problem is, when I work under the frame and when I cover all the details of explaining the texts and grammar/vocabulary exercises, I cannot afford the time to repeat myself several times to make my English understood by my students!

Gradually I found myself speak more and more in Chinese to my students. And that is not that bad as I found that in Chinese it is so much easier to relate to my students and it is also so many times easier for me to make successful jokes in Chinese than in English! However, there is a tiny problem with my Chinese. As I mentioned before, I was from a northeastern town in China, and my students laughed at certain parts of my local Chinese dialects. Well, I was embarrassed! I learned to watch my Chinese language and tried to avoid any phrases or tones that I feel might reveal my past.

It is only until recently that I began to change back to my local Chinese accent and dialects. Last year I finally finished writing my master degree dissertation and passed the oral defense and received the degree. The process of writing the final thesis was so difficult when I had to teach and to learn to fit into the newly married life. On many occasions I thought of committing suicide because of all the pressures. However, after I finished the master degree project, I found myself matured from it. I am now more patient and understanding to other people. Another big thing that happened to me during the same period is my witness of one of my close relative's death in a traffic accident. It was big shock to me, and after that I began to see how fragile and short life is. This event also helped me become mature and become more understanding towards people, including my students. I also become more confident and comfortable about myself as a teacher now. I feel comfortable today to share with my students where I am from. This confidence comes from years of teaching experiences, from my completion of my master degree, from my understanding and appreciation for life, and from my new lowered

standard for myself and a better welcome of who I really was and could be. When I first started teaching, I wanted to be on the top, to be somebody, but now I feel happy just to be able to continue to teach. And I believe I am a qualified teacher, and I could teach at least as well as many of my colleagues. I do not want to on top of them anymore; I just want to be one of them. And I know I can do this and so I am now more confident and more comfortable with myself. And I can feel comfortable with sharing where I am from and I can take more jokes about myself.

However, I have also decided to speak more English in my class, because that is one advice that I received from the expert teachers who observed my class. I take the experts' advice seriously and I respect them, however, I do not feel that it is necessary for them to sit in non-expert teachers' classes for the young teachers to improve their teaching. For me, my change came from my own desire to change. If I want to change, I will change no matter whether the expert teachers sit in my class or not. For me to decide to speak more English in my class is my own decision, although probably their advice made my decision come more decisively. For many of their other suggestions I just respect them but do not think they are relevant to my teaching. Their suggestions are just like my group prepared materials: together they make each other meaningful in that my group prepared materials are for the experts to see and the expert suggestions make up the framework for the group preparations. They are complete in their own circle. I respect their circle and I am never against that circle, and I follow their circle since I am

not a trouble maker. But within that circle I try to make my teaching enjoyable. I play my little part within their prescribed framework when they are not watching.

In fact, when they are not watching, and when the expert teachers are not sitting in my class, I am so much more relaxed and relieved! And my students are so much more relieved too! I still try to follow all the timelines that are prescribed to me, as I do not want to be a pretender who gives the experts a false teaching speed when they are there and follows my own schedule when no one is watching. I follow the timelines, but I do not explain as much in detail as far as grammar and structures are concerned. Instead, I give more time to my students for very short English presentations and to communicate with each other in English.

My students' presentation and the extra English reading materials that I chose for my students to read were two other aspects that I received negative feedback from the experts. They said the presentation and the additional reading materials were not related to the texts that I was supposed to teach. Well, I solved that problem now. Now I still give my students extra reading materials but I try to find and circle those words that also appear in the texts that we are required to read in our textbooks. And I assign my students presentation themes that are similar to those in our textbooks. I feel comfortable now because I feel I am doing the right thing that can help my students learn English and I am following all the rules.

However, I do not feel comfortable about the way we are promoted. When they decide whether a teacher can be promoted, all they look for is the number of articles that you publish.

But when a teacher is busy with teaching every day, where can she find the time to write? And in how many original articles can a teacher really have something to say? They ask for it. You know you cannot do it. And you do not want to fool either them or yourself. That's where the pressure is from. And in the end, it's all fooling each other when the teachers just publish repeated words in unimportant journals. I feel bad about this because I do not see a way out of this in an honest way.

I seldom read the journals because I feel the articles are irrelevant to my real world teaching. When I was writing my master degree thesis, I read more than one hundred articles but found most of them not helpful in my own writing, and my learning and teaching experience told me that these articles did not contribute much new or valuable.

Huai did her master degree in English literature. In China, there are usually two options for English majors to take their master degrees: either in linguistics or in English literature. As I mentioned in my narrative accounts, I took my master degree in "linguistics and applied linguistics."

The term "English teaching reform" is being repeated every day and it is the theme in most articles. However, I have no idea what the reform is really all about and what exactly they are doing in the reform. I do not see any fundamental change in the

teachers' teaching at all. The only change is superficial, like standardized teaching plans, standardized teaching schedules, and a lot more standardized things ... or the introduction of computer into the classrooms. But from my observation the computer and the Internet is of no help in classroom teaching at all. The Internet itself is a useful tool to the students when they can use it at their own will, but when they are forced to use it in class, it becomes boring.

That reminds me of another story. Last summer I, along with dozens of my colleagues, took a training course where expert teachers taught us how to use the CDs and the Internet related to that textbook we are using. The main focus of the training is to explain how to control the students' online time and how to make sure they are online for a certain amount of time. Techniques such as counting the number of clicks are emphasized. I feel fortunate that I was not in that "reform with the help of computer" group as I dread the control methods that we might be forced to use.

I feel a successful teaching reform must give the teachers enough initiatives. As I said above, teachers need to have the desire to improve themselves for reforms or changes to really happen.

I feel good about myself as a teacher today. I have somehow reached my own teaching system: I follow all the rules and textbooks and timelines, and I teach in my own style that is accepted by and beneficial to my students. In the future I will accept whatever they ask me to do, but I know I will always be a good teacher since I know I will always give my time and care to my students. I just hope that I can catch up with my colleagues:

if they are promoted by doing their job I want to receive the same reward. If they have certain things to do before they can be promoted I will do the same. When the time comes, I will find a way out of the circles (smile) ...

CHAPTER SIX:

NARRATIVE ACCOUNTS OF CHUANG AS A STUDENT AND ENGLISH TEACHER

Chuang and I came to the same university and to the same department in the same year. After graduation we both began to teach in the same department and became colleagues. Chuang is now taking his PhD program in pragmatics in a well-known university in southern China. Chuang is a full-time doctorate student, but he signed a contract with our Department of Foreign Languages in our university to return to his teaching position after his doctoral studies. Our university pays his basic salary each month. To sign the contract, Chuang paid 10,000 *yuan* to the university as a guarantee for his return.

Chuang's Living Space and His Early Schools

I was born in a village in Shandong province in China. I remember that there were about 2000 people in my home village when I was going to the local school between 1978 and 1983. My mother works on the farm. She never went to school and does not read or write in Chinese.

In China people who work on the farm do not enjoy the same advantages that citizens in the cities enjoy. They do not have access to social welfare or guarantee of basic life needs.

Besides farming, my mother also kept pigs, chicken and sheep. My father went to elementary school before the new republic China was founded and finished his elementary years in the new China's educational system. He did not continue his education but joined the Communist Army. After his demobilization, my father worked in the city, so he is a citizen, not a farmer. I have a younger brother and a younger sister. After my younger brother was born, family plan began in China. I went to the only local elementary school in my village. The school moved to several different locations when I was in grades one and two. My first class was in an about-to-collapse cottage. There were no desks or chairs in the classroom. Some parents helped to make some "desks" by using bricks and cement. The new school was built after I went to Grade Three, but there were still no desks or chairs in the new school classrooms. We were asked to bring them from our own home. My family could not afford a desk for me, so I brought a big stool as my desk, while I sat on a smaller one. Fortunately there did not seem a lack of chalk.

The situations in some rural areas in today's China were worse than that. As the Chinese director Yimou Zhang showed in his documentary movie No One Less in 1999, some school teachers and students in rural areas in China work very hard to use up the smallest pieces of chalk in their classrooms, sometimes the smallest pieces being all they can get.

Winter in my hometown felt rather cold, but there were no central heating inside houses or classrooms. Even today central heating was only available in some apartment or office buildings in Shandong province.

The teachers in my school did not obtain salaries from the government and therefore were not officially-recognized teachers. They were supported by the local people.

Today these local-people-supported teachers are still contributing their efforts in many rural areas in China.

While Chuang was sharing his early stories with me, I felt tears in my eyes. I recall how Chuang was laughed at by classmates in his undergraduate university life for his occasional awkwardness, seriousness and great dreams, and how he wiped the laughter off with good humor. I must have joined in the laughing too, partly to make myself safe to laugh at another dear old fellow whose situation was very much like mine but who became the target and victim at that moment instead of me. The laughter might be good willed and friendly, but I doubt whether I could still do it now that I know where he was from. It cannot be easy for him to make his way up till now. The tears might also come from recalling that we had both been working hard these past fifteen years as English teachers, that we both are making our ways through our PhD studies, that either of us can afford our wives and daughters a self-owned living place, and that we both still felt insecure in our teaching positions, especially after we both just failed a promotion to associate professorship.

"How many of your elementary classmates made their way into a university?" I asked. Chuang hesitated a moment, and replied without any sense of self-consciousness, "I must be the only one."

Chuang has a vivid memory and remembers a great deal about his first teacher in elementary school.

Our teacher was kind, gentle, and humorous. I cannot recall much of how my first teacher taught us, but he was close to us, very much connected to us, and liked by us. The only physical punishment from our teacher was to ask the wrong-doing pupils to stand in class for a few minutes.

Physical punishment from teachers was occasionally reported in China today. At the time when Chuang was in elementary school, physical punishment was supposed to be more prevalent and taken for granted.

My first teacher was from a minority group and was permitted to have two children.

According to China's family plan policy, the majority of families were only allowed to have a single child.

But my teacher's first two children are both girls and he wanted a son. When the teacher had a third child, he was fired from the school because of his violation of the family plan law. This happened when I was in Grade Four.

The teacher apparently liked boys better than girls when treating his own children, which Chuang called "feudalism." However, Chuang did not recall the teacher had biased treatment for girls and boys in the class..

On hearing the leaving of the teacher, all my classmates cried.

The new teacher to my class was not as popular. The new teacher might possess more knowledge than our first teacher, as this new teacher was a well-educated young man from the city who was practicing in the rural area in answering Chairman Mao's callings. However, this new teacher was not good humored and was introvertive in character. When pupils behaved wrongly, he was always angry on his own and never initiated a solution. This new teacher taught my class for one year before I graduated from the local elementary school.

My grades in the elementary school were very good, which earned me titles like monitor of the class. We did not have much homework compared to the elementary children in cities today. After finishing the little homework, I also helped with farm work and with feeding the domestic animals. I felt little pressure for school then. Competition in school and in life was not heated.

Chuang remembers they were in suspense of whether they would have to take an entrance exam for junior high school (or a graduate exam for elementary school). That was around the time when China's nine-year compulsory education policy was about to take effect.

Finally we did take an exam and in the new junior high school we were divided into two classes according to our grades in that exam. The upper-half-grade students were assigned to Class One. The other lower-grade students were in Class Two. Class One was in a nicer part of the school which was walled in, while Class Two belonged to the walled out area. I was in the privileged class so I did not know much about the

conditions in the other side of the school. However, most of the students in my class were from the bigger villages rather than small ones like my home village. The junior high school was fifteen minutes walk from my home.

There were about fifty students in my class. The classroom was reasonably well equipped with chairs and desks. There was also a small laboratory where we could do basic physics and chemistry experiments. However, I felt that not every teacher was qualified enough to teach us.

My first English class began in junior high school. My first English teacher was a young woman who was very kind and good looking and very much liked by us. She did not teach much about grammar and did not ask us to memorize grammar rules. She mostly asked us to read and memorize texts and vocabulary lists. She also interacted with us in simple English. I think her English pronunciation was good because my English accent, which I believe follows in most parts that of hers, was almost well enough for my university classmates and teachers to understand me.

When I was in grade two in junior high school, our English teacher suffered arthritis and had to leave her teaching post. While she was on leave, another English teacher, a young man who was also teaching in a senior high school, and according to some rumors, who was our English teacher's boyfriend, replaced her. This new English teacher emphasized grammar, and as a result we were bored and pressured and could not catch up with the teacher's grammatical terms. In the last term of my junior high, another

female teacher taught us English. This teacher believed that the faster you read English, the better your English was.

This belief is still active today. I have met Chinese children who read English so fast without a right rhythm, apparently encouraged to do so by their teachers or parents, that most of the English words were undistinguishable.

Because this new English teacher preferred students who read English fast, the girls in the class, whom I believe were born with faster-lip-movement skills than boys, won most favors from the teacher. I memorized most of the required English vocabulary, but I could not remember all the grammar rules. Before finishing junior high school and facing the more serious senior high school entrance exams, I re-learned all the grammar rules by myself. Back then I memorized all the English texts in our English textbooks, following our English teacher's orders. This memorization of texts helped me to memorize the new words in the texts, but did not help me much in understanding English grammar and in understanding new English passages.

Chuang's relearning experiences also reminds me of my own effort to review old English textbooks and to memorize those parts that I should have remembered earlier. It seems reviewing is a big part for both of us to learn English.

The senior high school entrance exam was a big blow to me. My grades could only position me in my local senior high school, not a key senior high school in the city. No graduate from my local senior high school ever made the way to a college, and I knew that the only hope for me to go to university was to get into a key senior high school in

the city. I blamed my master teacher for my failure in the exams. The only qualification for that teacher was that he had been extremely active in persecuting other educated people during the infamous Culture Revolution. He taught the course of politics, but he spent most of the class time making fun of and mocking his students and other local people by calling them bad names. I remember that almost all my classmates had been mocked at least once by that teacher. Partly because of the irresponsibility of the master teacher, discipline was loose in our class. In fact, in the last year of my junior high school, most courses were cancelled. Our chemical teacher, who had just graduated from a teacher's college, and therefore was a rare well-qualified teacher, was forced to tears by the naughty students. As most of the classes were not taught, the only way for those few students like me who wanted to enter a key senior high school was to learn on our own. Another distraction for me was the Gongfu, or martial arts, learning fashion. After watching the first influential martial arts movie in Mainland China, Shaolin Temple, by today's famous Hollywood actor Jet Lee, the biggest dream of many school-age boys was to become a monk in a Shaolin temple and to learn Shaolin Gongfu. Shandong Province has always been a Gongfu learning and teaching base, and in each village, there were some people who knew some Gongfu, and who became center of attraction for boys.

I had three good friends in my class who were also earning good grades and who were also planning to enter a senior high school in the city. My friends and I encouraged each other in our self efforts for studying. We were all boys.

In the rural areas then, according to Chuang, girls were not supposed to further their education. Probably to fit in this preset role, few girls in Chuan's school could match their boy classmates in school grades.

I lived in the school dormitory in the last term of my junior high school, partly because my good friends were also living in there and I did not want to part with them. About 100 boy students slept in one big hall. I brought a door from home and laid it on the floor as my bed. We brought from home ready-to-eat, long-lasting, and simple food, such as battercakes and pickles. There was a mess hall, but it was mainly used by teachers, not students. There was no fee charged for us to live in school.

My best friend, who was also the monitor in our class, and I both applied to the Number Three Senior High School in the city, which was a municipal key school and second in rank to the Number One and Number Two senior high schools, which were provincial key schools. My best friend successfully entered his dream school, while I, together with my other classmates had to endure failure. I felt very bad about myself and was faced with a future of farming on the little farm land that my mom owned. This big contrast of my dim future and the bright one for my best friend deepened my sorrow, though I was happy for my friend.

My father always admired old-fashioned gentlemanly scholars who could quote verses from classics in their everyday talks, and he had always been encouraging, or even nagging, me to study hard to become such a scholar. I had long been a little tired of,

and even a little annoyed by, his repeated message. But now after I failed the exams, I became humbled and was determined to try my best if I could have another chance.

The chance came from my father. His working unit, which was located in the city, had a contract with the Number Four Senior High School in the city, which was also a municipal key high school, and which was in the same rank as the one I applied to. The contract was that the unit would pay the school a certain amount of money so that all the children of the working staff in that unit could enter the high school with lowered grades. This was the biggest point of change in my life. I was sixteen years old then, and I was given this second chance.

Chuang's turning point reminds so much of my own crisis in my senior high school. It seems we both followed the same pattern of facing a failure, witnessing our father's intervention, making a big decision to study hard to live up to our fathers' expectations, and we were both given a second chance.

This key senior high school that I went to was in a four floor building, instead of the huts of my elementary and junior high schools. The school was only five minutes by bicycle from my father's working unit. My father had a dormitory in his working unit where he stayed overnight when he was busy with his work. This dormitory became the living place for my father and me during my senior high school life.

My father stopped nagging for me to study. He was dedicated instead to taking care of me. I got up at five each morning to study and my father had already had our breakfast ready by then. We stayed in that dormitory for the weekdays and went back to

our home in the village on the weekends, which was only half an hour's ride by bicycle. Both my father and I became silent most of the time. We both knew what we were doing.

My entrance grades were the worst in my class of over seventy students, most of whom were from the city. I knew this because each student was assigned to a student number from one to over seventy according to their grades, with Student Number One possessing the best marks. My number was the last one in my class.

My English teacher was a young female. We found our English teacher could read English clearly but could not answer our questions about grammars and sentence structures, and a lot of times could not help us understand the sentences that we had questions about, even if the sentences were short and not complicated.

I put more efforts in learning all the grammar rules in all my old and new English textbooks. This helped me in understanding the English texts and in getting good grades in the English tests, which were mainly made up of questions about English grammars. In my second year in the senior high school, however, I had to face short unlearned English passages and answer questions about them in my English tests. I found that I knew each individual English word in the passage, but that I could not understand the sentences at all. I had never read any English passages besides the texts in my English textbooks. My English grades, which had been improving after I re-learned the English grammars, again dropped to the bottom in my class.

I tried to find a way to improve my comprehension of written English. I went to the bookstore and to my great pleasure I found there just arrived many abridged and

adapted English stories, which included "King Arthur and His Round Table Knights," and "Mosquito City." I eagerly bought the books and equally eagerly read them. The sentences in those stories were simpler than those in the passages of our English tests. Though I could not precisely understand each sentence, I followed the stories very well. I was happy that the Chinese translation of the stories was at the later part of the book, leaving the English stories uninterrupted. Had the translation been laid side by side with the English counterparts, I might have relied more on Chinese rather than English.

I started my reading from "King Arthur and His Round Table Knights." The first few pages were very hard for me, but I gradually made progress. When I was in the middle of the book, I found to my surprise that I could pretty well follow the story and that I almost forgot I was reading in English! My English grades amazingly rose to the top in my class because I could understand my test passages pretty well after reading several adapted and abridged English stories.

However, I soon faced a new challenge in my English test: writing. I again suffered from lack of practice since I had never written any short passages in English.

English writing was an important part of the English test in the Entrance Exams for Universities and Colleges, but many senior high schools did not train their students to write in English. In fact, a lot of students did not know they would have to write short passages in their English tests until the big exams were close at hand. Chuang was one of those students who were taken by surprise to know that he had to learn to write in English.

I tried to find help from my classmates by asking them how they learned to write in English, but because of the high competition among classmates, no one would like to tell me. I again decided to help myself.

My self conceited method was to write diaries in English. At first it was very difficult and time consuming for me to write even one complete English sentence in my diary. The sentences thus produced with great effort must have been full of grammar and usage mistakes too (I could not find my own grammar and usage mistakes then). But despite all the difficulties and drawbacks, I kept writing each day. One and a half months later, I found my improvement in English writing was very evident. I was able to produce simple but correct English sentences quite easily then. Those simple English sentences and paragraphs were good enough to meet the requirements in the Entrance Exams.

Because of my efforts, my grades in other subjects also greatly improved. My total grades in all the subjects ranked to the top twenty in my class in the middle of my first term in senior high school, which was a great achievement considering that my entrance grades were at the bottom of my seventy plus classmates. By the end of the first term, I amazingly ranked number seven in my class. By the end of the second term, however, my grades dropped a little bit to number thirteen, which I thought was because of my lack of good learning strategies. By the end of the third term, my new strategy helped me to reach top four in my class, and top five among all the same year students. This enabled me to receive a special prize and honor, together with the other top four students in our school year, from the headmaster in front of the whole school students. My new learning

strategy was simple: at the end of each day I go over everything I learned on that day and memorize all the science formulas and facts.

In the third and final year of my senior high school (the fifth and sixth term), I was the unchallenged top one student in my school. I came a long way from the bottom to the top. I became a little lazy in the final year of my senior high school because I was not challenged for my number one position. I felt that had I been in the Number One or Number Two senior high schools, where competition was even more heated, I would have tried harder. I worked very hard in my first and second years in the senior high. At that time my classmates were mostly taking it easy. Now in the final year, which was mostly a year for renewing what we had learned in the first two years, my classmates began to work hard while I could take it easy and stay ahead of them all.

In this year we had a new English teacher. I liked the teacher's humor and flexibility in organizing the English class, but felt I did not learn much from that class. What we wanted was another male teacher who taught us just once when our English teacher was ill. This teacher that we admired was able to produce a low pressure and enjoyable class while we felt we learned a lot.

It is interesting to note that several times when Chuang said he liked a teacher, he described the teacher as humorous. However, a sense of humor seems not all that can determine whether the teacher can go to Chuang's "good teacher" category. As illustrated in the above comment, Chuang wanted a teacher who was not only humorous, but who could also make him learn in the class, and who created a low pressure experience.

Chuang's University Life

I would have loved to go to Fudan University in Shanghai, and to major in physics. I was very good at physics in senior high school and was called the "little Einstein" by my classmates. However, the rumor is that because students from Fudan University were active in the 1989 Students Movement in China, Fudan was given special care from the central government and reduced the number of students it would accept in Shandong province. I then turned my attention to this good reputed university in Northeastern China. I liked this university because I saw in a journal that the entrance grades of its students were high in the previous years.

In China, students' majors are usually fixed from the first day when they enter the university. When they fill up their applications, they also fill up their preferred majors. If their grades were not good enough for the particular majors they applied for but are good enough for entering other majors in the same university, the students have a choice of whether they will accept the majors the university will assign them to. Usually it is very complicated and discouraging for a university student to change majors. Chuang was satisfied to enter this northeastern university. However, he regrets his choice of English as his major.

I was good at physics and chemistry in senior high school; however my good grades in them mainly came from my hard efforts. In comparison, my improvement in English seemed a lot easier. I felt I only read some English grammar books and some English stories and then wrote some English diaries to catch up and then to lead my

classmates in English. It seemed to me that I either had a golden touch for English or that English was really easy. I wanted easier success in my future career so I decided to major in English.

The second reason for me to major in English was because I was misled by the name of the major offered by the university: English for Science and Technology.

Literally in Chinese, the preposition "for" does not appear in the name of the major, and the title of the major can be literally translated as "Science, Technology, English." Sometimes the titles for majors are misleading for students who do not know details about them. Choosing a major by merely looking at the names of the majors is still in practice in China today, and therefore the potential deception still exists.

I liked and was good at sciences and technology, and English was my preference for future career development, so the major sounded a perfect match for me.

Of course after I came to the department I was disappointed at how little the English professor knew and cared about sciences and technology and how light sciences and technology weighed in the curriculum.

I still think it a great pity even today that I did not major in "real" sciences and technology. I felt I could have done a lot better in sciences and technology fields than in English. I must have become a full professor by now if I had majored in those fields.

Chuang was a lecturer when he was speaking to me in this conversation. The titles for teachers in universities in China are lecturer, associate professor, and full professor.

Like me and Huai, Chuang never listened to any native English speakers before he entered university. Nor did he have any experience in speaking English. Listening and speaking were not tested in the English exam for the entrance of universities then, and therefore were not properly represented in high school English teaching.

My first class in the university was taught by an American teacher. Even though the teacher spoke in a clear voice and at a slow speed, I could not understand her. However, I could tell from the clamors and laughter that many of my classmates could understand the teacher pretty well. It's only after two months that I was able to understand most of the American teachers' teaching.

As I thought when I was applying to the university, I did not meet big challenges in my English learning. My grades in my class were about number six among sixteen classmates.

Unlike me, Chuang did not feel disappointed when he was not one of the students sent as exchange students to America. He never planned to go, as the guarantee money that the students would have to pay the university was an astronomical number to him.

I was overall happy in my university life; however, I was quite depressed in my third year. One source of depression was loneliness. I did not have a girlfriend. I admire those lovers on campus.

There were quite a few pairs of lovers on campus then and many of them put up shows of kissing and touching in public. They did this either because they did not have a private place to go or because they felt well in showing their superiority of being in love.

Whatever the reason, they did make a lot of "single" students feel lonely and bad about themselves.

I always feel I have the potential for poems and music, so I expressed my loneliness and depression in them. I also find it hard to understand others and to be understood, and to help myself on that I read a few psychological books like those by Freud.

When I was facing graduation, I had already drawn the conclusion that anywhere in China could be my new home. When my classmates were finding jobs through social relationships, I waited. When the Department of Foreign Languages where I was studying wanted some graduates to stay to teach, I applied and was accepted.

Chuang and I thus became colleagues in the same department. We taught the same courses for a few years before Chuang was shifted to teach English major students.

Chuang as an English Teacher

It's been a hard life since I became an English teacher in 1993. In my first teaching term, I taught twenty-eight hours a week. I felt I spent all my time preparing for and teaching classes, and marking students' assignments. I could not go to bed until midnight and had to get up early each morning. I felt I was a mechanical clock that was running by an unseen power. I have not been able to teach heavy load after my first year of teaching.

In my first year of teaching, the only thing I enjoyed was my visits to my students on evenings. But those visits ended when I was married and lived off campus. In my first year of teaching, I felt my students were my friends. They were friends to me especially outside classrooms. Today, after more than ten years of teaching, I feel my relationship with my students is not as close as in my first year. However, I now view my students as equal persons as myself. Therefore, I never scold my students. As a teacher I do not possess any special power over my students. They as individuals have the right to choose their way of living.

In my teaching, I feel I do not have any say in deciding what subject I teach, how much material I cover in each class, and how many students sit in my class. Very often I am asked to finish too much material for each class so that I do not have a choice to interact with students. Class size is another problem. When I was teaching non-major English students, I was able to ask questions for students to answer because there were only thirty students in class. Question asking is not a very satisfying way of interaction, but even this was deprived when I was teaching English major with a class size of over 100 students.

I am proud that I was able to have a chance to teach English majors, however for these many years I was only asked to teach courses considered minor in importance to the English majors, such as English grammar, which every teacher was trying to avoid teaching, and which the students hated. In such a class when I was facing more than 100

students each time, how could I possibly get to know them individually? How could I possibly communicate with or motivate them?

Looking back on more than ten years of teaching experiences, I feel very dissatisfied and depressed. My life was hard. I could not totally devote myself to my teaching because of my worries about supporting my family. With my salary, I could not afford to buy or even to rent an apartment. For some years my wife and I had to share a two-bedroom apartment with two other girls. By trade those two girls invited a lot of male customers to their room each day. My wife was pregnant then and stayed at home. Whenever I was teaching, I was always worried whether my wife was safe from the strangers who went to our apartment. My pregnant wife and I also had to share the bathroom with the two girls, who washed themselves in there each time after they received their customers. Each time my wife and I used the bathroom, we worried about getting social diseases. This apartment was lent to me by the university, who turned a deaf ear to my pleading for a change of rooms. Not surprisingly, my teaching during that period did not go well because, simply, I could not concentrate and focus on it!

While I was burdened for my living conditions, I took the entrance exam for a master's degree program. Another teacher and I had the same grades for the entrance exams and had to compete for one seat. I felt I should be accepted because my grades for the major subjects were higher than the other teacher's. However, in the end I did not obtain the chance and I had to watch the other teacher with the same grades enter the

studies, while I had to wait to try again one year later. I felt hurt and felt I was all alone when I was facing those difficulties.

During these years of teaching, I see a lot of problems with the English teaching system in the universities in China. First of all, I feel the national Standard English exams are really doing a lot of harm to our English teaching in universities. I feel whoever is forcing these exams on students are for their own financial benefits, but at great cost to students and teachers. The exams cannot test the students' real English competence. This national English test system is really binding the students, who cannot graduate from a university without passing the exam. When students have to spend a lot of time preparing for this exam, which does not test their real English skills, they waste the time and energy which could have been used to improve their communicative English skills.

In the universities in China, non-English-major undergraduate students usually take English courses for two years. They are then asked to take the national standard English test, called the "Band Four" English test. In many universities students cannot receive their degree unless they pass this "Band Four" exam. English majors are also required to take a national standard test, called the "Professional Band Four" English exam. In recent years a few universities are retreating from this "Band Four" exam system for non-English majors, which is becoming more and more notorious for interfering with university English teaching/learning. But the majority of universities still require their students to take them.

To pass the standard English exams, students need to memorize a lot of new words and usages, but they do not have enough chances to use the language in real communications. I do not favor "memorizing" as a teaching method, especially rote memorization. However, there are certain things that need to be memorized when we learn English, like English words. I feel from my experiences the best way to memorize the words is to use them in reading, listening and speaking. I feel my students do not like my suggestion to learn the new words in this way because it takes time. They prefer to memorize lists of words from the dictionary. This works when they are facing an English exam in the near future, but in the long run, this is a waste of time.

From my studying and teaching experiences in the English department, I feel the courses for English majors are not well designed. A lot of courses are useless, meaningless, boring, and without any challenge or insights for thoughts. I raised this question to my department in my undergraduate studies. The department told me I should not care about my thoughts, but that I should concentrate on improving my English skills. Well, cannot we explore some thoughts while we improve our English skills? Can English skills be improved without challenging our thoughts? As I said, I regret taking English as my major. In my four years of studies in the university, almost all of our courses are compulsory. We were not given a wider range of choices to develop our characters or even our talents.

In my four years of studying in the university, I read many books on philosophy and psychology on my own, as I was eager to understand the world and our lives. But I did not have a chance to share my thoughts with my classmates or my professors, and I did not have any guidance in selecting my reading materials. I saw a lot of my classmates

spending almost all their time memorizing new English words and other facts and details which offer them no help at all in understanding and thinking about the meaning of life.

In our universities in China, all students are trained in the same courses, graduate at the same time, and produced with the same plan.

Right now in China, students apply to study in specific majors in universities. When they enter universities, their majors are already fixed. Students of the same major usually take all their courses together until they graduate. Their courses are mostly compulsory, though in recent years there are a few optional courses available. Students who enter the university in the same year usually graduate on the same date.

Students are like pieces of paper cut out with one single knife. This is the mass production style that was popular in the machinery era. This educational system is the extension of the industrial system as mentioned by such scholars as Marshall McLuhan. The universities are producing workers, not masters. They produce order- and rule-followers who go to and leave classes on time, sit in classes silently, take notes, memorize them and take exams. The universities are mass-producing machines, not thinking intellectuals.

I feel I, as a teacher, am also treated as a teaching machine. I go to classes, follow textbooks, teach exam-related knowledge, and leave the classroom. There is no space for me to have discussions in my class. There is no space for interaction and communication.

I once talked to a director in our department to say that I did not want to become a teaching-smith. To my surprise, he said, "Look at our department, the teaching-smiths

are the back bones and they are holding up the sky. There is nothing wrong with becoming a teaching-smith."

A teaching-smith is one who follows rules, not someone who can think. However, a teacher needs to be a thinker and a researcher. How can a teacher who does not even know what he/she is thinking become a qualified and praised teacher? What is the educational system encouraging us teachers to become?

The university I am working in is doing a lot of good work in improving our teaching facilities, like computer labs. However, the university is not doing a good job in providing basic living needs for us young teachers. My salary does not provide me enough to buy or even rent an apartment. With these worries and the time I have to spend in teaching extra hours for a living, I have little energy left for academic development. I am forced to become a "teaching-smith."

To become a good teacher and researcher, I need to set my mind on my career, not on having to provide enough food for my families.

In China, employers had always provided accommodation to the employees. This situation changed around 1990s. Before that time living apartments were built or bought by employers and then assigned to employees to live in, with the ownership of the apartments in the employers' hands. Employees could always live in the assigned apartments as long as they worked for the same employer. After the 1990s, however, the central government of China issued a series of housing reforms asking employees to buy and own their own living spaces. With the average salary for the working class in China, they need to work dozens of years to save enough money to afford an apartment. Bank loans only began to be available very recently.

I feel my basic living needs are not promising to be met in this university. I have always been working hard to improve myself to be a better qualified teacher. I became a teacher after I received my first degree, and then I had my master degree, and now I am studying for my PhD. All through the years I was hoping that my living conditions can be improved while I am better qualified, but I am now disappointed: my conditions have not been improved at all. I still do not have a place to live, and I am now almost economically broke. This year for the third year I am refused to be promoted to be an associate professor, while the teachers who are much younger than me and who are not as qualified are being promoted. The reason I am refused is because I did not publish as many papers as some of my colleagues. Right now in China if you are willing to pay the money some less famous journals will publish anything you write. For me, if I do not have something worthwhile to say, I will not publish. And I will never copy things from other journals to publish. I cannot understand why some teachers can publish as many as twenty or thirty papers in one year. What I want to understand is when the teachers published more than twenty papers, do the papers really mean anything to their teaching? Do the publications make them better teachers? Do they really know how to do research work? I do not think so. For me, I need months to collect data, and to write it down. Sometimes halfway through I may have to stop and reconsider what I am writing. I cannot imagine myself or anyone publishing more than twenty papers in one year.

When the committee decides whether you can be promoted or not, all they care is how many papers you published. They do not read your papers. They just count the numbers. They encourage the fast writers and punish serious researchers. I am in several

projects in the university where I am taking my PhD, but to my surprise, the committee did not consider them at all. They only count the numbers from journals.

In China your title decides your salary and welfare. I am already three years behind. I do not see a bright future to have my basic living needs met working in this university.

I have not been a very successful teacher, though some students did give me encouragement when we met again years after I taught them. However, I always feel that I have great potential to become a good teacher and researcher. I long for the day when I can have my own voice in language studies and teaching. I long for the day when I do not have to worry about my living needs, but can devote all my efforts to my teaching and researching. I will have a good chance to become a good teacher and researcher then.

CHAPTER SEVEN:

NARRATIVE OVERLAPPINGS

In this study, I wanted to find out a) how the places, times and relationships shaped who I was as a student and who I was/am/will be as a teacher; and b) the relationship between who I was/am/will be as a teacher and who I was/am/will be asked to be by the educational landscape. In doing so, I tried to inquire into my personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985), my curriculum making on the professional knowledge landscape of English teaching in a university in China (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), and my identity (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). I researched the puzzle by studying my past experiences, my "stories to live by" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), in the three dimensions of a) past, present, and future time; b) places we lived in; and c) relationships in our lives. While I re-live and research this puzzle I am also doing a narrative inquiry with two other English teachers to piece together similar puzzles in their lives. Now I will pull out the threads in our "stories to live by" to piece together the research puzzles in this study.

I. Our Starting Landscapes

We teachers "play roles in many ways defined by others" (Greene, 1978, p. 39). For Greene, "interpretations of these roles must, in some manner, be grounded in an understanding of [our]selves" (p.39). As Green noted, it is important to "bring teachers in

touch with their own landscapes" because "then learning may become a process of the 'I' meeting the 'I'" (p.39)

I was born in a small forest town; Huai was born in an even smaller forest town; Chuang was born in a little farming village. We three all grew up in "underdeveloped" areas which were economically disadvantaged compared to bigger cities in China. When our life stories shifted from our homes to bigger places, the times we lived in also changed. Chuang and I were born in 1970. China's Cultural Revolution, which interrupted regular learning and teaching in schools and universities (Wu, 1993), ended three years before we two were born. When Chuang and I started elementary school, and when Huai was two years old, China started to open its doors to the rest of the world and began a series of economic and educational reforms. We have all seen how fast China's economy has changed in the past years. Likewise, China's education also developed remarkably. More universities were built, and more students have access to higher education. The educational system has been going through changes, but the heated competition among students to go to different levels of "better-ranked" or "better-reputed" schools and universities never changed. This competition has been a tone setter for a lot of student stories, teaching stories, school stories, and family stories. Huai's, Chuang's, and my stories were lived within this big educational background.

Chuang, Huai and I were all from "working families." We all received support from our families for our changing of schools and working towards universities. We did

not get academic help from our parents, as they all had limited education themselves, but the family supports were all very strong.

When my father was powerless in helping me into a better-reputed school through regular procedures, he begged and made a promise on my academic achievements. Chuang's father always urged him to become a particular kind of scholar that Chuang did not really care about. But when Chuang's father helped him to get into the key senior high school, the nagging stopped. Instead, he began to take care of Chuang's living. Chuang and his father did not talk to each other much, but they "both knew what they were doing." Huai's father, through his relationship with an old classmate, helped Huai to get into a better-reputed junior high school, where she made her way up finally to the university. In all our three accounts, there is a strong family unity in the goal of entering a university. This goal took years to be achieved. The goal shaped our personal stories, and our family stories.

II. Our School Landscapes

A. Major turning points

My transfer to the city senior high school with a good reputation was the biggest turning point in my school life. Chuang's biggest turning point was also his entering the city key senior high school. "This was the biggest point of change in my life," Chuang said when he was commenting on entering that school. We both wanted to enter the senior high schools very badly, and we both lost the first chance. We both were given a

hard-earned second chance, and we both took it preciously. We both became dedicated, goal-focused, hard-working students in our dreamed senior high schools. Chuang and I had our turning points when we made it into our dream schools, but the turning points really came about as a result of our change of attitudes towards our studies.

At the turning point in our school lives, we yielded to the "sacred story" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) that we had been avoiding. The "sacred story" told us to put our hearts and efforts to our studies. We had been avoiding the "sacred story" because as children we wanted to enjoy our personal stories. We knew that once we served the "sacred story" whole-heartedly, there was little room left for our personal stories. The punishment of failing to submit to the call of "sacred stories" was severe. It was a status-less, hopeless life, with a strong sense of failure and dishonor/indignity to us and to our families. Chuang said, when he failed in the entrance exams for key senior high schools, "I had to endure failure. I felt very bad about myself and was faced with a future of farming on the little farm land that my mom owned." My realization came when I saw my father losing his, and our family's, dignity, as a punishment of my failing to tend to my studies. Similar realization of the seriousness of the punishment shocked us both to the realization of the seriousness of our school work. We submitted to the "sacred story" not so much because we valued it but as we saw how powerful it was and how weak and helpless we were when we lost favor from it.

Huai's first turning point was also her change of attitude towards her studies. Huai also tasted some punishment of failing to do what the "sacred story" told her to. Rejected

by the "good grade" girls, she became friendless and lonely, a severe punishment to a young school girl. When she realized she could earn back her honors and friends by doing what the "sacred story" told her to, she happily did so. For a time Huai felt satisfied and secure. However, this sense of security was soon lost when she, like Chuang and I, entered a better-reputed school.

B. Sense of insecurity

Immediately after Huai entered the junior high school in the bigger town, she "experienced a hard transition from a local village-like school to a much more formal and high-reputed junior high school." Chuang, Huai, and I all felt insecure in the better-reputed schools we transferred to. Chuang took two years to climb from the bottom of his class to the top of his school. During this long period, he saw, among other subjects, his English grades shifting back and forth. Huai always felt she was "falling behind" in grades, though her grades were good. These concerns for our grades were reason enough for Chuang, Huai and I, to be nervous all the time. Besides, the lurking entrance exams for universities, the ending of the "sacred story," which had the final and only say to determine all our past efforts and future, should legitimately make us all feel always in suspense and insecure.

However, there were other reasons for us to feel insecure. Huai said, "Despite my good grades, however, I did not feel I was being accepted and liked by my master teacher, which I think is because I was from a small forest center and because my parents were

not in high and powerful positions." I had a similar insecure sense of being not one of my classmates. I entered the city senior school through, what I believed, a family insult of begging. Before I entered, the headmaster had told me my grades were not good enough. I had been announced as inferior. This announcement was rooted in my mind. My subsequent good grades were not able to take that away. Besides, like Huai, Chuang and I were both from smaller places. We three all felt we were different from the majority of our classmates. We not only came from smaller, and therefore "more awkward," places, we did not enter the better-reputed schools through the "normal" way. Our fathers, through different ways of influence, helped us through the "back door." We were "illegitimate" students. This seeing "who we were" in others' eyes, through what we were like in others' stories, rather than in our own eyes and through our own stories, helped us lose ourselves, as well as our sense of security.

This sense of "insecurity" also followed us as a theme in our teaching stories. For me, in particular, I never seemed to have felt secure since I decided to follow the "sacred story" in my senior high school. There are different "sacred stories" in different periods of our lives. In school, the "sacred story" told how we were expected to study; in teaching, the "sacred story" told us how we were supposed to teach. Invariably the "sacred stories" interrupted our "personal stories," the way we wanted to learn and the way we wanted to teach. This interruption of my "personal stories" explains why I felt lost and did not know who I was. While busy with catching up with and devoting all efforts to the "sacred

story," I lost track of my "personal story." I forgot or tried to forget what I really desired and cherished.

C. Choosing a major

Huai, Chuang and I were so much in an effort to keep up with our studies, so sure that it would bring us somewhere, that we did not really know where we were going. We put all our efforts and energy into our studies, without any free time to think about what we should major in a university for a future career. We three made our choice of majors in a split second, with convenient suggestions from people around us, and with a quick reading of the names of the majors.

Chuang and I chose "English for science and technology" because we liked the name of the major: both English and sciences. Huai made the same choice because her teacher said English was good for a girl to learn. With the situations in universities in China then, once we chose our majors we normally could not change our minds. "You got what you got." "You chose it you'd better stick to it." Part of the "sacred story." Luckily Huai and I seemed to like English well enough; while Chuang still sometimes wonders about the "if only I had chosen sciences" story.

As we three never thought English would be our major until the last minute of our senior high school, none of us three thought we would be English teachers when we entered the university. Though we chose to be teachers almost accidentally, we are all devoted to our teaching, where we are working hard to fill in the roles the "new" "sacred

story" desired of us, and where we are struggling to hide or "cover" up our "personal practical stories" in ways that they could fit into the "sacred story" line.

III. Our Teaching Landscapes

A. The "sacred story"

In the earlier part of my schooling I neglected my school work and turned a deaf ear to the calling of the "sacred story." The shocking experience of transferring to the city senior high school made me hear the callings and submit to it. Likewise, my new teaching stories like the "big classroom," the "staff meetings," and the "presentation," made me realize how a "new" "sacred story" was shaping my teaching.

The "sacred story" Plotline One states that we teachers are knowledge transmitters. A teacher's job is to deliver knowledge. Teachers are not seen as possessing knowledge. The knowledge was in the textbooks and the teaching plans gave us instructions of how to deliver it. This fits in with what Freire (2000) called the *banking model* of education. Chuang, Huai and I all experienced how this plotline shaped our teaching. Chuang said:

> In my teaching, I felt I did not have any say in deciding what subject I teach, how much material I cover in each class, and how many students sit in my class. Very often I was asked to finish too much material for each class so that I did not have a choice to interact with students.

Huai expressed similar dismay of having no say in what she taught and how she taught. She saw the "group preparation" as a show rather than a place where teachers could discuss real teaching issues. She said:

> All the teachers in our office, which are up to three dozens, would sit together and "group prepare" for the texts we are going to teach. I think most of us realize that this is a routine that we have to go through. I personally never found our group prepared materials useful in my class .... The only usage of those materials is for the experts to check so that we who are under observation could escape the blame that we are not following the official orders from above.

Huai and I both feel that our group preparation for the course we teach is nothing but a routine. Although there have been some changes in the way we prepare together as a group, many of the routines remain. Teachers usually sit together listening to one teacher's briefing of main grammar rules and phrases to be covered in the English text we are going to teach in the following week. We are also given timelines which specify what part of the textbooks is to be covered in which class time. If I can extend Chuang's metaphor of mass production of students, the group preparation is like the mass production of teaching machines. Huai found the only usage of the "group prepared" teaching plans was as "cover stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996) for the "sacred story." Huai said, "My group prepared materials are for the experts to see and the expert suggestions make up the framework for the group preparations. They are complete in their own circle." Those teaching plans, useless though in making her classroom the way she desired, had a binding force to determine how she should teach. It is officially the procedures the teachers should take to transmit the knowledge in the textbooks. The

knowledge and the procedures are all ready for the teachers; all they need to do is to follow the instructions and deliver it. By this it seems the "sacred story" had made teaching easier for us. We teachers could just follow the rules, shut our minds and do the job. However, by this plot line, the "sacred story" denies that teaching is a relationship (Carter, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999); it denies teachers' personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Clandinin & Huber, 2005); it makes teachers into teaching machines instead of curriculum makers (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Carter, 1993).

Huai and I were both unhappy about the way we as a group prepared our teaching plans in our staff meetings. In my stories of the staff meetings, I was upset that most teachers sat silently. "The teachers and other school staff did not feel safe in whole group staff meetings to reveal the passions in their hearts" (Clandinin & Huber, 2005, p. 51). What I would like to have in the staff meeting is a safe place where teachers can freely exchange ideas and teaching stories at a table, a communicating and sharing place, not one where most teachers sit listening to the director or to grammar and vocabulary details.

The "sacred story" Plotline Two says teachers should be controlled and "managed." One way we teachers were controlled and managed was by the staff meetings. The staff meeting had two basic functions. One was the group preparation of the teaching plans, and the other was discipline setting and checking. Both functions helped put and keep teachers "under control." As commented by Huai, the group prepared materials were

valueless in making our teaching the way we desired. However, they were meaningful in the "sacred story." They control the way teachers deliver knowledge. As Huai said, "This time plan is a serious matter and if we were caught not closely living by it punishment can be severe."

In my stories of the staff meetings, I was upset with the second function of the meetings. I was concerned that a) they were so solemn, b) only the director spoke, and c) teachers' names were called for praise and rebuke. When I shared my concerns, the answer I received confirmed the second function of the meetings: "It is the only way to manage the teachers." The underlying message is that we are not capable of managing ourselves, that we are not professional enough to know our field or to make decisions. By treating us like this, they are "de-professionalizing the professionals" (Blair, personal communication, Edmonton, October 20, 2005).

The other way to keep the teachers under control was through the "expert teachers" "scrutinizing" in "non-expert teachers" classrooms. The "expert teachers" acted as police (Blair, personal communication, Edmonton, October 2, 2005), checking how well we "non-expert teachers" were following the plotline of the "sacred story." By using the "expert teachers" as police in our classrooms, and by their right of dropping in at any time without notice, the "in-classroom" place was also under control like the "out-of-classroom" place (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). In this way, we "non-expert teachers" did not have a safe place for our "secret stories" unless we put on real good "cover stories," like what Huai did. First of all, Huai did not like to be scrutinized, though

she respected the expert teachers. She thought the scrutinizing had no use for her to improve her teaching. In fact they interfered with her otherwise more enjoyable classes. She said:

> I do not feel that it is necessary for them to sit in non-expert teachers' classes .... For me, my change came from my own desire to change. If I want to change, I will change no matter whether the expert teachers sit in my class or not .... For many of their ... suggestions I just respect them but do not think they are relevant to my teaching .... In fact, when they are not watching, and when the expert teachers are not sitting in my class, I am so much more relaxed and relieved! And my students are so much more relieved too!

I too was stressed by the "expert teachers," especially by the fact that they had the power to decide how well I taught by the tedious details they believed (on behalf of the 'sacred story') the most important for teaching. I wrote:

> Things like untidy blackboard writing, unsuitable clothes worn by teachers, the teachers not following the timelines assigned to them closely enough, were all good reasons for the teachers to be scolded and warned.

Once caught breaking any of the above details, the teachers could be scolded in front of all the staff in a meeting, or worse, have their names posted on the announcement board of the university for all teachers and students to see. This potential punishment causes fear, not improvement, in our teaching. To "play safe," we followed the plotlines or covered our stories. In my story with the expert in my class, though I was not punished by not following the teaching plans closely, the danger was always there, and the power was in the expert teacher's hands. I chose to live out my "secret stories" with the potential risks. However, there are also prices to be paid when we totally followed the plotlines. In

the "sacred story" teachers' personal practical knowledge is not seen as knowledge. Personal practical knowledge interferes with teachers' "objective" transmitting of the *real* knowledge, and personal practical knowledge should be forgotten and gotten rid of. Therefore, when we teachers lived out the plotlines of the "sacred story," it should not be a surprise that we lost track of our "stories to live by" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), and could not find who we were or our voice. "How can anyone have voice until he or she first values what he or she knows?" (Blair, 1994, p.14).

The "sacred story" Plotline Three says teachers teach so that students could pass exams. Chuang was very upset about the national English exams. He said:

> I feel the national Standard English exams are really doing a lot of harm to our English teaching in universities. I feel whoever are forcing these exams on students are for their own financial benefits, but at the great cost of students and teachers. The exams cannot test the students' real English competence. This national English test system is really binding the students, who cannot graduate from a university without passing the exam. When students have to spend a lot of time preparing for this exam which does not test their real English skills, they waste the time and energy which could have been used to improve their communicative English skills.

My story of the "big classroom" also illustrated how exam-oriented students expected their classes to be. In my story, I came into the classroom with desires to communicate with and connect with my students in English, to share opinions and ideas. However, my students came to that class to learn facts and skills to pass a major exam. Our goals were different. I did not want to be a teacher who taught students "shortcut"

methods to pass exams. The students did not want to "waste" time "beating around the bush" of communicating in English in order to learn English.

Despite China's educational reforms, the examination system did not change much. When exams stay the same, and continue to decide students' future, the various reforms do not have fertile grounds to make differences. My experiences of returning to teach in the "big classroom" confirmed this.

The "sacred story" Plotline Elusive says there are other hidden or explicit rules that teachers need to figure out and follow closely. This plotline also says that some plotlines might be confusing, like the reform ones, because the authorities are not very sure yet where they are going. In that case, teachers should try their best to sense what is going on, lest they be punished without being warned.

These plotlines make it difficult for us to teach the way we want to teach or to live out our "secret stories." These plotlines also make it difficult for real changes to happen in the English teaching landscape. In order to survive in this landscape we put on our "cover stories." We call them "cover" stores because these are not the real stories we intend to live in. What we really value are the stories under these covers, the "secret" ones. The fact that we put on "cover stories" to live our "secret stories" indicates that we are not giving up. We shall try and have our voices and stories heard. When our voices and stories speak louder and more publicly, we might, one day, even have influence on the course of the "sacred story."

B. Promotion

A very similar pattern to our focus on grades when we were in school was our focus on publication numbers. It seems rather than quality, quantity is speaking much louder in deciding our teacher's position. Huai, Chuang and I have all expressed our great anxiety for this trend, as none of us seem to be willing to or ready to publish just for publishing's sake. Chuang said,

> Right now in China if you are willing to pay the money some less famous journals will publish anything you write. For me, if I do not have something worthwhile to say, I will not publish. And I will never copy things from other journals to publish. I cannot understand why some teachers can publish as many as twenty or thirty papers in one year. What I want to understand is when the teachers published more than twenty papers, do the papers really mean anything to their teaching? Do the publications make them better teachers? Do they really know how to do research work?

Like Chuang and I, Huai was also upset about the way teachers were promoted. Concerning this matter, she said,

> I do not feel comfortable about the way we are promoted. When they decide whether a teacher can be promoted, all they look for is the number of articles that you publish. But when a teacher is busy with teaching every day, where can she find the time to write? And in how many original articles can a teacher really have something to say? They ask for it. You know you cannot do it. And you do not want to fool either them or yourself. That's where the pressure is from. And in the end, it's all fooling each other when the teachers just publish repeated words in unimportant journals. I feel bad about this because I do not see a way out of this in an honest way.

The exact message and meaning of the educational reforms have been vague, as they usually came by word of mouth from different levels of administrations and no

documents or announcements have been given to us with explicit explanations. However, one change that came with it is the differentiated payments for teachers in the university. When I first became an English teacher in the university, my salary was not greatly different from the salary of a full professor. At that time, the main difference between salaries was determined by how many courses the teachers taught. Each teacher was paid the same amount of money for the same length of teaching time, regardless of their titles. With the educational reforms, and in line with China's economic reforms, right now in our and many other universities in China, teachers' titles of lecturer, associate professor, and full professor help determine teachers' salaries, housing subsidization, involvement of teaching in graduate courses, application for funding, and many other hidden aspects like social status and even possibility of sending children to attached elementary schools with a discount. Now I, as a lecturer, earn a salary that is a lot less than a full professor even though we teach the same courses. This may sound fair since full professors have more qualifications and experiences than lecturers. However, sometimes, like in Chuang's and my case, there might be a feeling of unfairness when the promotion system does not seem to play fair by only counting the quantity of publications without valuing the quality of them and other aspects of qualifications. To be sure, quantity and quality do not have to go against each other. However, quantity with quality does mean more time and effort than quantity without quality. Chuang and I feel we have become victims within this promotion system, and we are already a few years behind some of the teachers who came to teach in the same year as us. How and how well we are going to play with

this quantity versus quality game seems to be a focus for the rest of our struggling teachers' career lives.

C. Gap between ideas and practice

Huai, Chuang and I all wanted more interaction between teacher and students and among students themselves in our classes. However, because of the prescribed teaching plans, the big size of the classes, the existence of exams, and the presence of experts, we could not easily put this into practice. The interaction and communication in our classrooms came with a high price. First we might have to hide them under "cover stories." Before any "extra-requirement" discussions or interactions took place, we must make sure we had covered and followed the timelines in our teaching plans. Then we had to make justifications for the discussions and interactions by making them connected with our required teaching contents. Huai learned this lessen when she was criticized by the "expert teachers." They said the "presentation and the additional reading materials were not related to the texts that [Huai] was supposed to teach." When all the "covering" preparations were finished and some communications did take place, we still were not sure whether we would be awarded or punished.

We all felt unclear directions from the university and from the expert teachers who sat in and evaluated our teaching. Probably this is part of the "sacred story" "plotline elusive." The "expert teachers" themselves did not necessarily agree with each other on how to interpret and execute the "sacred story." However, they each possessed the power

to evaluate "non-expert teachers." Their evaluation on the "non-expert teachers" could mean potential punishment to them.

The same elusiveness could be ascribed to the educational reform. As Huai said,

> The term "English teaching reform" is being repeated every day and it is the theme in most articles. However, I have no idea what the reform is really all about and what exactly they are doing in the reform. I do not see any fundamental change in the teachers' teaching at all. The only change is superficial, like standardized teaching plans, standardized teaching schedules, and a lot more standardized things … or the introduction of computer into the classrooms.

Our university, following the trend in China, asks teachers to reform our teaching, but we teachers have no say in teaching contents, class sizes, classroom arrangements; we teachers are evaluated by students who have to take English tests which we teachers have no part in designing (student's evaluations for teachers were posted on the Internet at the end of each term and teachers with their individual passwords could each see their own; however, the director of each office has the passwords for all teachers and can look them all up on the Internet); we teachers have to be evaluated again by experts who might like "reformed" teaching but who might equally desire more "traditional" ways of running classes. This is part of the teaching landscape we are now in. We are following unclear directions; we are being judged by unclear requirements; we are asked to do one thing for "reform" and then another for "exams," which are often contradictory to each other. Teachers are facing dilemmas and tensions in this landscape. Some teachers use "cover stories" to survive the dilemmas (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). For example, in Huai's stories, she followed the group prepared teaching plans as a "cover," and she connected

the extra reading materials and her students' presentations with the themes of her teaching contents as another "cover." Under these "cover stories," Huai felt safer to live out her "secret stories" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) with her students.

While we try to live a few "secret stories" with our students under the "cover stories," we also try to find directions in the "sacred story" that becomes more elusive with the reforms. Among all these hiding our "secret stories" finding directions, it is no wonder we feel insecure and lost. When the "sacred story" rules out and over our "personal practical knowledge," our "stories to live by," our sources of who we are, we are lost for more than one reason.

Right now our English teaching reform does not seem to be going anywhere. First of all, as Huai said, the message of the reform is not clear. Probably as I said in my "sacred story" "plotline elusive," the authorities are not really sure what they want in the reform. Sometimes we seem to feel that the reform wants teachers to have "student-centered," communicative language teaching (CLT) classrooms. However, as Huai and I described in our accounts, the "expert teachers" who sat in our classes and who evaluated our teaching did not always seem in favor of our communications and interactions in class. Besides, if teachers are wanted to teach classes in communicative ways, then we had better be treated the same in our teachers' meetings. In fact this is the same gap between idea and practice that Dr. Wu shared in his story where educational authorities invited professors to orient their teaching staff in the communicative textbooks but ordered the teachers under training to sit still with their mouths shut.

For real reforms to take place and to make sense, teachers need to have a place to share our ideas about them. We need some free place where we could make try out our ideas and learn from our mistakes. We need to see role models and to learn from each other, not "experts" who scrutinize, criticize and confuse us. We need to be part of the curriculum, part of the designer of our courses. We need to be treated as knowers, not just teaching machines. We need to be allowed to learn from our and other teachers' experiences. We need to have back our personal practical knowledge, and to use it as resource to help us understand why we teach the way we do, and why we want to teach in certain ways. Only when the decision and policy makers listen to teachers' and students' ideas, listen to our stories, can the reform really take place.

D. English learning and teaching among many threads

Chuang, Huai and I learned English in high schools not in exactly the same ways. I memorized texts in our textbooks. Chuang memorized some texts, but his main progress was made through reading English stories and writing English diaries. Huai, though wrote some diaries in English in the early part of junior high school, mainly copied and reviewed her English teachers' notes throughout senior high school. Our determination for good achievements in the entrance exam seems to have mattered more than our studying methods. We were very highly motivated to study hard. I wanted to learn English well, just like we wanted to learn the other subjects well, in order to achieve our

goals of entering a university. Our English learning was among the other threads in our lives.

Once in the university, as English majors, we knew we needed to learn English well enough to communicate in it. I had a very hard time to understand oral English and to speak English at university. Huai also had great difficulties understanding and speaking English when she was studying in America as an exchange student. Chuang also took months to comprehend his American teachers. We three were all exam-oriented in learning English in high schools. We received good grades in the entrance exams for universities. However, we were not able to communicate very well in English.

As English majors, we listened to English radios and tapes, watched English movies, discussed ideas with American teachers. What we learned in non-communicative ways in high schools was part of our vocabulary, grammar, and reading basis. But it was through interacting with and in English that we improved our English communication skills. We all walked a round-about way in listening and speaking English. If we had been given chances to listen to and to speak English in high schools, it should have helped us in our grammar, vocabulary and reading too. Now as English majors and English teachers we realized that we all desired to teach in a communicative and interactive way.

Many factors seem to be influencing how we teach. First of all, the "sacred story" that I have been discussing sets the tone and framework for our teaching. The "sacred story" is the combination of the policies, traditions, power relations and other eminent or hidden rules we are living in and under. Within the current "sacred story," as teachers we

have very little say in designing our course lines, composing individual teaching plans, and using personal preferable teaching methods. Teachers usually have no say in deciding and designing exams that students take.

As a result of the reforms, teaching, which used to be almost all the job description for English teachers, is now only one part of our job. The other part is research. Right now a lot of the research work is being elevated to the level of "science," which, right now in our landscape, has little to do with our personal experiences, or "personal practical knowledge" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996). This disconnection between research work and personal practical experiences also explains why Chuang and Huai both questioned the use of publications, since those articles did not seem to have any link with real-world teaching.

Right now in China's English teaching landscape, for policy makers to understand what is happening in classrooms and in teachers' and students' lives, there should be more voices for qualitative research, including narrative inquiry and ethnographic research (e.g. Blair, 1994, 2001; Blair & Sanford, 2003; Sanford & Blair, 2002). If teaching is a rich relationship (Carter, 1993; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999), if research needs to be connected with real teaching, we need to connect our personal experiences with our teaching and research efforts. I believe narrative inquiry, among other qualitative research efforts, is a good tool to do this. I think teachers' stories, as part of their voices, should be publicly told, as in Casanave and Schecter (1997). Story telling could reveal the rich relationship in teaching; story telling is closely connected with our everyday

teaching. Of course, narrative inquiry is not just "telling stories" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We need to realize this to help legitimate it as a research method, which I believe is very necessary and helpful in today's educational landscape in China. Our personal practical experiences need to be legitimated is as valuable resources for we teachers' professional knowledge. For policy makers to understand teachers and students, for English teaching reforms to succeed, teacher stories, student stories, school stories, stories about teachers, stories about students, and stories about schools need to be told and heard.

For Huai, Chuang and I, our teaching journeys have long begun, and have just taken some turns, but are still on their starting points. We are working hard to be qualified and worthwhile teachers to our students. However, we need more room for trying out our ideas of teaching; we need more support for taking care of the many life threads in our lives to fully develop our academic potentials. As an old Chinese saying says, after people are settled down safely, they enjoy and devote to their jobs (安居乐业). This is what I dream of as a teacher.

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